

EDUCATION DEPARTEMENT

There are times in life when everything is about negotiation.

MAURITIUS

by Theresa Rebeck



directed by Rachel Walshe

sandra feinstein-

GAM
t h e a t r e

STUDY GUIDE

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*This study guide was prepared by
Tracey Morreo and Steve Kidd*

This study guide is made possible thanks to the generous support from: The Rhode Island Foundation, the Alice I. Sullivan Foundation of Collette Vacations, the Carter Family Charitable Trust, MetLife Foundation, Bristol County Savings Charitable Foundation, Bank of America, The Hassenfeld Foundation, The June Rockwell Levy Foundation, Alliance Blackstone Valley Federal Credit Union, a Community Development Block Grant, The John Clarke Fund, Arts Funding in Pawtucket, and the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts.

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 *Mauritius* by Theresa Rebeck. We are delighted to bring this comic thriller to the stage and eager for you to enjoy it with your students.

This is a very contemporary play and in many ways a mature play, with graphic language and some stage violence. It is important for you, your students and perhaps even the student's parents to know this before attending the show. Please advise the students that a professional theatre setting is different from a movie because we the actors share the space with you – and just as you can see and hear us, we can see and hear you. So, it is important to not talk during the show and save your thoughts for after. However, we encourage you to laugh, applaud and engage with the drama as it unfolds. I will be in the play as Denis and will also lead a talk-back after the show.

and *now* let us talk about what you will find in this study guide.

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 Theresa Rebeck and *Mauritius*. In this act, you will find a biography of Rebeck and the production history of the play.

In act three, Director Rachel Walshe articulates her vision and ideas behind our production and 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. 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.

(From Robert Cohen's *Theatre: Brief Version*)

"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

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: Theresa Rebeck and Mauritius



Mauritius, written by American playwright, novelist and screenwriter, Theresa Rebeck, fits nicely into our season at The Gamm, being performed on the heels of a very successful run of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Often compared to David Mamet's *American Buffalo*, *Mauritius*, explores similar themes, but on a more "domestic level". In fact, Rebeck's writing style is often compared to Mamet's. The difference being Mamet's plays are very much male based and Rebeck's are based on strong, female characters. Rebeck is well known in the writing community for being an outspoken advocate for women playwrights and theater artists. She has also been quoted by the New York Times as saying her writing is often about "betrayal and treason and poor behavior. A lot of poor behavior"

Theresa Rebeck was born in Ohio and graduated from Ursuline Academy in 1976. She earned her undergraduate degree at The University of Notre Dame in 1980 and holds an MFA in Playwriting and a PhD in Victorian Melodrama from Brandeis University. She has also taught at both Brandeis and Columbia Universities. Describing herself as a "playwright who writes novels", she authored the first of two novels in 2008 called "Three Girls and Their Brother". "Twelve Rooms With A View", her second novel, was published in 2010. She has also written for television shows such as *Dream On*, *LA Law* and *Third Watch* and been a writer/producer for *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* and *NYPD Blue*. She has won numerous awards for her work in television writing and was also nominated for two prime time Emmy Awards. She has written for *American Theatre* magazine and had excerpts of her plays published in the *Harvard Review*. Rebeck was also the winner of the National Theatre Conference Award for her play *The Family of Mann*, and was awarded the William Inge New Voices Playwriting Award in 2003 for *The Bells*

The world premiere of *Mauritius* took place at the Calderwood Pavillion of The Boston Center for the Arts in October 2006 and was produced by the Huntington Theatre Company. The production received much acclaim, including an Eliot Norton Award for Outstanding Production as well as an IRNE award for Best New Play in 2007.

Mauritius was also Rebeck's Broadway debut and was produced at The Biltmore by the Manhattan Theatre Club on October 4, 2007. The production which was directed by Doug Hughes, and starred Alison Pil, Katie Finneran, Dylan Baker, F. Murray Abraham and Bobby Carnavale, who earned a Tony nomination. It was the only original play by a woman during that fall to make it's Broadway debut.

The West Coast premiere of ***Mauritius*** was in the spring of 2009 at The Pasadena Playhouse. It was also named one of Top Ten Most Produced plays of 2008-2009.

Rebeck wrote ***Mauritius*** after finding pictures of the One and Two Penny Post Office stamps online. After some research she discovered that those particular stamps were at auction for \$1.5 million a piece. This information fueled her interest in Philately, the collection and study of stamps. What particularly moved Rebeck in her exploration of Philately was that the errors or flaws in stamps are what make them most valuable. Rebeck took this idea and ran with it, weaving a tale of flawed stamps and flawed people together in a thrilling con game where the stakes are raised and the betrayals unfold in each and every scene. Perhaps the one line that sums this up is spoken by Dennis, the wanna-be stamp dealer when he tells Jackie, "...It's the errors that make them valuable. That's kind of my theory on people."

The Gamm Theatre is proud to be staging the Rhode Island Premiere of ***Mauritius***.

Act III: Our Production

We are pleased to have Rachel Walshe, make her Gamm directorial debut with this production of *Mauritius*.

From the Director:



“Honestly, I felt like my whole career as a playwright has been so hyperdefined by my gender—sometimes I feel like it is strangely blinding, even—and it’s time for all of us to look at this, and talk about it, without going “oh there’s not really a problem” because there IS a problem—and then start talking about what we, as a community, are going to do to solve it.” —Theresa Rebeck

I have enormous respect for Theresa Rebeck, not simply for her talents as a playwright but also for her courageous and outspoken views on gender parity in the American theater. It is taboo to consider gender when discussing art. After all, shouldn’t the best plays receive the most productions regardless of whether those plays have been authored by a man or a woman? Ideally, yes. But, as Rebeck has pointed out, in order to accept that principle, we must *also* accept that only 17% of women playwrights can pen “good” plays, because that’s the number of women produced on American stages last year. Nearly 10 years ago, the New York State Council on the Arts conducted a study of Broadway and regional theaters that revealed the same dismal statistic: Plays by women comprise roughly 15-17% of what’s seen on American stages. So in 10-years’ time, things have simply flatlined. In fact, a recent study out of Princeton by economist Emily Sands Glassberg suggests that not only have we flatlined, but it’s likely getting worse. Quite simply put, women writers aren’t getting a fair shake.

I can’t help but see some of Rebeck’s personal frustrations with the “boy’s club” of the regional and Broadway theaters played out in the character of Jackie in *Mauritius*. Crippled by a vitriolic review that dismissed her *Butterfly Collection* as feminist diatribe, Rebeck’s career all but dried up:

*“I couldn’t get produced...No one wanted to touch *The Butterfly Collection* and no one wanted to touch me. And then I fell off of the map. I got really depressed because of all this, as you might imagine, and I couldn’t think anymore.”*

Not unlike Rebeck, Jackie is at her lowest when the play begins. Crippled with debt, mourning the loss of a stricken mother for whom she cared utterly alone, and desperate to escape the shackles of a traumatic childhood, Jackie pins all her hopes on “two tiny slips of paper”—the Mauritius stamps. In order to earn the freedom she so intensely seeks, she must play a dangerous and cutthroat game of negotiation with three men who are far more skilled and vicious than she—or so it seems.

If Jackie starts the play a lamb who unknowingly wanders into the wolf’s den, it’s not long before she grows fangs of her own. In a series of stunning reversals, Jackie proves to be anything but the easy mark that the men of *Mauritius* make her out to be. She fights her way back to life, quite literally, and emerges...well, you’ll see.

Not unlike Jackie, Rebeck fought her way back to life, making her way to Broadway with the wonderful play you are seeing today. She is now not only one of the most-produced contemporary women writers (not only for the stage but TV and film, too), but an important voice in the chorus of those demanding change:

“We need to stop discussing why the numbers are so bad, and stop asking where are the women playwrights, and we need to start recognizing them where they are—which is right in front of us—and hold them up and celebrate their voices, and produce their plays.”

I couldn’t agree more.

-Rachel Walshe

Dramaturgical Notes:

Money for Nothing and Mauritius

by Jennifer Madden, Ph.D and Gamm Resident Dramaturge

The philatelist will tell you that stamps are educational, that they are valuable, that they are beautiful. This is only part of the truth. My notation is that the collection is a hedge, a comfort, a shelter into which the sorely beset mind can withdraw. It is orderly, it grows towards completion, it is something that can’t be taken away from us. —Clifton Fadiman in “Any Number Can Play”

A thing worth having is a thing worth cheating for. —W.C. Fields

In *Mauritius*, estranged half-sisters Jackie and Mary squabble bitterly over a paltry inheritance following the death of their mother: assorted jewelry and a stamp collection. Jackie, fragile and damaged, claims their mother left her the collection. Mary, the long-absent prodigal daughter claims the collection as her own. But the inheritance might not be so paltry, for it includes the famed “Post Office” stamps from the African island nation of Mauritius: two of the rarest in the world, considered the “crown jewels” of philately (stamp collecting) and staggeringly valuable due to both their scarcity and the flaws in their design. But are the stamps real or fake? And to whom do they belong? Jackie enlists an unsavory and potentially dangerous crew of philatelists to assess their worth.

Dangerous stamp collectors, you ask? Rather than the quiet, genteel world we imagine, playwright Theresa Rebeck’s form of philately breeds lies, manipulations, cutthroat double-cons, and even attempted murder. Rebeck says much of her work shares qualities of “betrayal and treason and poor behavior. A lot of poor behavior.” And there’s *plenty* of poor behavior on display in *Mauritius*.

The play is bitterly comic while exploring the deeper complexities of modern existence. Rebeck provides a peek into the 21st-century American psyche and her complex and compromised characters reflect the current desires of our culture: money for nothing, the easy scam, and the lucky break over hard work. In the face of easy money (and lots of it) do family, loyalty, and morality mean anything? What would compel someone to pay upwards of six million dollars for two stamps? The power of possession and the singularity of obsession lie at the heart of collecting. The stamps themselves are almost irrelevant. Collecting becomes the ultimate form of commodity fetishism, and ownership of the desired object offers the possibility for reinvention and ultimate self-actualization.

The mythic Mauritius stamps also signify the literal and figurative burden of inheritance. How do we pull ourselves from the muck of familial obligation? How much do our families and our past define us? Rebeck offers tantalizingly few details concerning Mary and Jackie’s upbringing. Yet she provides us with *all* the information we need to know. Mary remains alienated from a family she barely knew while Jackie suffers from the psychic wounding of perhaps knowing them too well. Mary hopes to reclaim her place in the family by maintaining ownership of the stamps. Conversely, while ridding her self of the stamps and collecting what she considers her due, Jackie can reinvent herself, effectively erasing her past. Her real inheritance is the promise of rebirth, a tabula rasa secured in unmarked bills. Jackie begins the play in a powerless position, perceived as a weakling and a dupe because of her age, demeanor, and gender. Yet neither her powerlessness nor her gender conveys much in the way of morality, for Rebeck is uninterested in cheerleading for her “team.” She writes:

“... I believe that women are as fully human as men and that their experiences are as worthy of representation, as universally significant, as men’s. I believe that the hero’s journey is both male and female. I believe that, as a rule, women are as deeply flawed as men are. I’m interested in writing about the way both genders make mistakes and the ways we grow, or don’t grow.”

“It’s the errors that make ‘em valuable,” Dennis remarks about the Mauritius stamps toward the end of the play. The same might be said of Rebeck’s characters: flawed, complicated, and valuable.

Act IV: Questions for Discussion

1. Who is the main character of the play? Identify the protagonist and antagonist
2. Does this play take place in a few hours, days, months? What benefit do we get by having a play take place in a short amount of time?
3. Dennis says "...It's the errors that make them valuable. That's kind of my theory on people." Discuss how this idea appears throughout the play
4. In what way is the "get rich quick" mentality present in every aspect of our daily life? What does this say about us as a society?
5. How are we defined by our family? What do we owe to them?
6. How do we negotiate our own desires and needs with our familial obligations?
7. Can we suggest a good moral for this story?

Epilogue

Thank you for joining us for Mauritius 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 or reach Steve Kidd at 401 723 4266 ext. 17.