

Arsenic and Old Lace

May 6 - 15, 2022

New Hazlett Center for Performing Arts

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THEATRE^{CO}

Prime Stage Theatre Resource Guide

Welcome to Prime Stage Theatre's 2021-2022 Season *Beyond Imagination*

Bringing Literature to Life!

Dear Educator or Parent,

We are pleased to bring you *Arsenic and Old Lace* written by American playwright, Joseph Kesselring and directed by Liam Macik. After its debut on Broadway in 1941, *Arsenic and Old Lace* became one of the most successful comedies running for 1,444 performances. The play continues to be a favorite production in amateur and community theatre revivals and is read in many school theater and language arts programs through out the country.

All literature produced by Prime Stage is always drawn from middle and secondary Reading Lists, and themes are in the current Pennsylvania curriculum.

This Resource Guide is designed to provide historical background and context, classroom activities, and curricular content to help you enliven your students' experience with the literature and the theatre. We encourage you to use the theatrical games and creative thinking activities, as well as the Theatre Etiquette suggested activities, to spark personal connections with the characters and the story.

If you have any questions about the information in this resource guide, please contact me and I will be happy to assist you. I welcome your suggestions and comments!

Monica Stephenson, Education Coordinator

Prime Stage Theatre

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The activities in this guide are intended to enliven, clarify and enrich the text as you read, and the experience as you *watch* the literature.

OUR EDUCATION PROGRAMMING

Literacy in ACTION Program (LACT)
 Global Classroom Program
 Student Matinees/Field Trips
 Act 48 Workshops
 Educational Resource Guides
 High School Drama Awards
 Technical Theatre Internships
 The Jasmine Nyree Theatre Project
 Students Together Organizing Prevention (STOP) Program

OUR EDUCATION PROGRAMMING IS FUNDED IN PART BY THE FOLLOWING FOUNDATIONS

Allegheny Regional Assist District (RAD)
 American Eagle Outfitters
 Jack Buncher Foundation
 Laurel Foundation
 The Fine Foundation
 Henry C. Frick Education Fund of the Buhl Foundation
 Elsie H. Hillman Foundation
 The Grable Foundation
 PA Council on the Arts

PRIME STAGE THEATRE EDUCATION STAFF

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Heather Sendera <i>Student Matinee Box Office</i>	John Dolphin <i>Education Consultant & Global Classroom Coordinator</i>
Lawrence McCullough, PH.D. <i>STOP Program</i>	Wayne Brinda, Ed.D. <i>Producing Artistic Director</i>

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Featured National Standards:

English/Language Arts

Standards Developed by International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English

1. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic) of human experience.
2. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context and graphics).
3. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, and video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
4. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, and video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
5. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
6. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Theatre

NA 5-8.3 Designing by developing environments for improvised and scripted scenes

Students analyze improvised and scripted scenes for technical requirements.

NA5-8.7 Analyzing, evaluating, and constructing meanings from improvised and scripted scenes and from theatre, film, television, and electronic media productions

Students articulate and support the meanings constructed from their and others' dramatic Performances Students use articulated criteria to describe, analyze, and constructively evaluate the perceived effectiveness of artistic choices found in dramatic performances.

NA 9-12.2 Acting by developing, communicating, and sustaining characters in improvisations and informal or formal productions

Students analyze the physical, emotional, and social dimensions of characters found in dramatic texts from various genres and media.

NA 9-12.3 Designing and producing by conceptualizing and realizing artistic interpretations for informal or formal productions

Students analyze a variety of dramatic texts from cultural and historical perspectives to determine production requirements.

NA9-12.5 Researching by evaluating and synthesizing cultural and historical information to support artistic choices

Students identify and research cultural, historical, and symbolic clues in dramatic texts, and evaluate the validity and practicality of the information to assist in making artistic choices for informal and formal productions.

NA9-12.7 Analyzing, critiquing, and constructing meanings from informal and formal theatre, film, television, and electronic media productions

Students articulate and justify personal aesthetic criteria for critiquing dramatic texts and events that compare perceived artistic intent with the final aesthetic achievement.

Students analyze and critique the whole and the parts of dramatic performances, taking into account the context, and constructively suggest alternative artistic choices.

All Prime Stage productions and Resource Guides address the following:

Pennsylvania Common Core Standards for *A Wrinkle in Time*
Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking

CC.1.3.9-10.A: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CC.1.3.9-10.C: Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CC.1.3.9-10.D: Determine the point of view of the text and analyze the impact the point of view has on the meaning of the text.

CC.1.3.9-10.E: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it and manipulate time create an effect.

CC.1.3.9-10.F: Analyze how words and phrases shape meaning and tone in texts.

CC.1.3.9-10.G: Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.

CC.1.3.9-10.H: Analyze how an author draws on and transforms themes, topics, character types, and/or other text elements from source material in a specific work.

CC.1.3.9-10.K: Read and comprehend literary fiction on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.

CC.1.5.9-10.A: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grades level topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CC.1.5.9-10.G: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English when speaking based on grade 9-10 level and content.

CC.1.6.11.A: Listen critically and respond to others in small and large group situations. Respond with grade level appropriate questions, ideas, information or opinions.

CC.1.6.11.C: Demonstrate awareness of audience using appropriate volume and clarity in formal speaking presentations.

CC.1.6.11.D: Listen to and acknowledge the contributions of other students well introducing ideas and opinions to enrich the discussion.

An Introduction to *Arsenic and Old Lace*



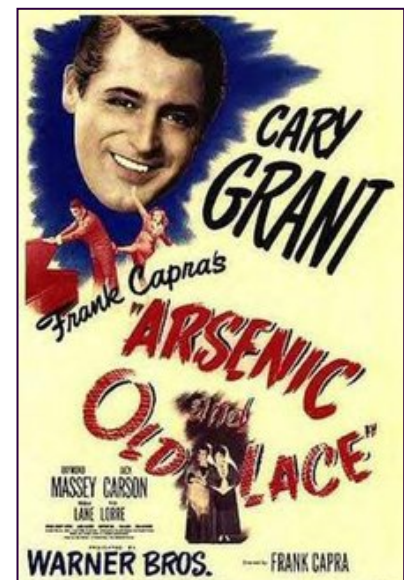
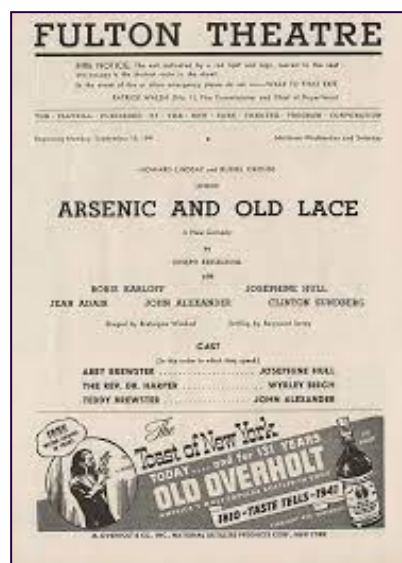
Times Square, NYC in 1941; image from *Life Magazine*

In 1941, New Yorkers were looking for some entertainment to take their minds off of the war in Europe and the growing fear that America would be pulled into it. On January 10, Broadway gave them exactly what they were looking for in the form of a hilarious new play by Joseph Kesselring, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. The play became an immediate critical and popular success, running for 1,444 performances. It also became a hit in England in 1942 as theatergoers who were suffering through post-bomb London lined up for tickets. In 1944, Hollywood produced a film version starring Cary Grant that became a huge box office success.

The play, a clever combination of the farcical and the macabre, centers on two elderly sisters who are famous in their Brooklyn neighborhood

for their numerous acts of charity. Unfortunately, however, their charity includes poisoning lonely old men who come to their home looking for lodging. The two women are assisted in their crimes by their mentally challenged nephew who believes he is Teddy Roosevelt and who frequently blasts a bugle and yells "charge" as he bounds up the stairs. Matters get complicated when a second nephew, a theater critic, discovers the murders and a third nephew, who bares an uncanny resemblance to actor Boris Karloff, appears after having just escaped from a mental institution. In his nimble mixture of comedy and mayhem, Kesselring satirizes the charitable impulse as he pokes fun at the conventions of the theater.

The Program title page for the premier production at the Fulton Theatre in 1941 and theatrical release poster for the film version in 1944.



Information sourced from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/arsenic-and-old-lace>

An Arsenic and Old Lace Summary

In 30 seconds...

The play begins in the living room of the Brewster family home, which is inhabited by Abby and Martha, spinster aunts who care for their nephew Teddy. In the play's first moments, they meet with Reverend Dr. Harper, who mentions Abby and Martha's other nephew, Mortimer, and the Reverend's daughter Elaine have been courting. The aunts and the Reverend are soon joined by two friendly police officers, Klein and Brophy, who are dropping by to pick up a charity box from the philanthropic Brewster sisters. Teddy is introduced and proves to be quite insane, although mostly harmless. He thinks he's Theodore Roosevelt. The Reverend and police leave, and the family is soon joined by Mortimer, who announces that he's accompanying Elaine to a play that night. He's also planning to propose to her shortly.

The happy family reunion doesn't last, however, as Mortimer discovers a dead body hidden in the living room. He's horrified and accuses Teddy of killing the man. But Abby and Martha reveal they were the killers. Not only did they poison the man with their secret stash of homemade elderberry wine, but he was actually one of a dozen men they have killed this way. The sisters explain that they're actually doing a good deed, from their perspective. They befriend lonely old men who have lost the will to live, give them a good time, and then kill them with the elderberry wine, which is laced with arsenic. They tell Mortimer not to worry, because Teddy is downstairs digging a grave in the cellar. They have told Teddy that he's digging the "Panama Canal."

Elaine arrives at the house, and Mortimer is anxious and worried. He tells her that he'll have to break their date for the theater because of a pressing family matter, and they briefly argue before she leaves. Mortimer's brother Jonathan arrives next, accompanied by his mad surgeon friend named Dr. Einstein. Jonathan, a sadistic career criminal, has had his face changed by

Einstein to look like Boris Karloff. Teddy invites Einstein down to the cellar to inspect his digging work. Einstein returns and tells Jonathan that there's a hole big enough to bury Mr. Spenalzo, Jonathan's latest victim, once everyone goes to sleep. Jonathan and Einstein head out to the car to retrieve the body, and this leads to a farcical segment as people move bodies back and forth, trying to avoid detection. When the lights finally come up, the entire family realizes there's not one but two dead bodies in the house.

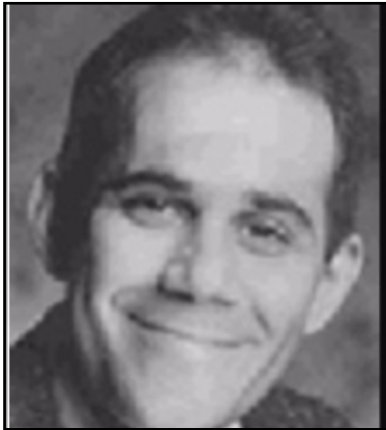
The family members begin hurling accusations and threats at each other. Because of the noise at the house, the family is visited by Officer O'Hara, who checks in to make sure there's no criminal activity. After he sees nothing out of sorts, he corners Mortimer, who works as a drama critic, to discuss a play that O'Hara is writing. Lt. Rooney, O'Hara's superior, joins them, and immediately recognizes Jonathan as a recently escaped convict from a prison for the criminally insane. Jonathan tries to buy his freedom by selling out his family, but the police do not believe his claims about dead bodies in the cellar.

Teddy, still acting as President Roosevelt is deemed insane by the officers, and is taken to Happy Dale Sanitarium, while Einstein escapes entirely. Mortimer still has to deal with the problem of his aunts, but is pleasantly surprised when they agree to go to Happy Dale with Teddy. Before they go, they tell Mortimer that he's actually not a Brewster—he's an illegitimate child and won't pass the congenital Brewster insanity onto his own children after marrying Elaine. Ecstatic, Mortimer goes to find Elaine. The play closes as Abby and Martha meet with the visiting head of Happy Dale and offer him a glass of their homemade elderberry wine.

...or less.

A drama critic must deal with his eccentric family, including two sweet aunts who cheerfully poison elderly men with elderberry wine.

About the Playwright



Joseph Kesselring (July 21, 1902 – November 5, 1967) was an American playwright who was best known for writing *Arsenic and Old Lace*, a hit on Broadway from 1939 to 1944. He was born in New York City to Henry and Frances Kesselring. His father's parents were immigrants from Germany. His mother was an English Canadian.

Kesselring spent much of his life in and around the theater. In 1922, he began teaching vocal music and directed stage productions at Bethel College, a Mennonite school in North Newton, Kansas. After two years, Kesselring left teaching and returned to the stage, working for two years with an amateur theatrical group in Niagara, New York. He began working as a freelance playwright in 1933, completing 12 original plays, four of which

were produced on Broadway: *There's Wisdom in Women* (1935), *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1939), *Four Twelves are 48* (1951), and *Mother of that Wisdom* (1963).

Arsenic and Old Lace was his masterpiece. It ran for 1,444 performances on Broadway and 1,337 performances in London, and became a staple in high school and dinner theater circuits. The 1944 movie adaptation was also a comedy hit. Kesselring died on November 5, 1967, in Kingston, New York, at the age of 65.

In 1980, the National Arts Club created the Joseph Kesselring Prize for up-and-coming playwrights. It was funded by Kesselring's widow, Charlotte. Among the playwrights who have won the prize are Tony Kushner, David Adjmi, Doug Wright, Anna Deavere Smith, David Auburn, Rajiv Joseph, Melissa James Gibson, Jo Carson, Nicky Solver, José Rivera, Naomi Wallace Tracey Scott Wilson and Marion McClinton.

Information sourced from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Kesselring

To learn more about Joseph Kesselring's early years, read the following article entitled "Another Look: Joseph Kesselring, Bethel College, and the Origins of *Arsenic and Old Lace*" by Keith L. Sprunger.

Check it out at the link below:

<https://mla.bethelks.edu/ml-archive/2013/another-look-joseph-kesselring-bethel-college-and.php>

'Joseph Kesselring' by famous character artist, Al Hirschfeld

Published June 15, 1941.

Description: Joseph Kesselring, author of *Arsenic and Old Lace* with some of his brain children.



HIRSCHFELD © Al Hirschfeld Foundation

Characters

ABBY BREWSTER (Late 60s): An elderly woman seen as sweet and polite, she is the sister of Martha and an aunt to Teddy, Jonathan, and Mortimer. While Abby and Martha seem to have the airs of old-fashioned society women, they poison elderly men who come to their home seeking lodging. Abby is the more dominant of the pair and considers herself a good Christian, despite her dark deeds.

THE REV. DR. HARPER (Male, 50s): Dr. Harper is a refined gentleman, a minister and neighbor to the Brewster sisters. He displays a clear fondness for Abby and Martha but is not so approving of their nephew Mortimer trying to date his daughter Elaine.

MARTA BREWSTER (Late 60s): Abby's sister Martha is the more submissive of the pair, but still a woman of her own with a wicked sense of humor. She too is ruled by her Christian sensibility, however is never struck by the irony of their murderous actions. She believes wholeheartedly that she and her sister are helping these men find peace.

MORTIMER BREWSTER (Late 30s): The youngest brother of Teddy and Jonathan, Mortimer is considered the only "sane" person in the family. Mortimer works as a theatre critic (something he admits he knows almost nothing about), and is deeply in love with his aunts' neighbor, Elaine. Classically chivalrous and equally as foolish, Mortimer would do anything to protect his aunts from the murderer in their home, even if he doesn't realize the murderer is them.

ELAINE HARPER (20s): The minister's daughter, but not like you would expect. Elaine is young, sharp, and a little bit sassy, displaying surprising wisdom throughout the play. A huge range of emotions makes her a thrilling character to play.

TEDDY BREWSTER (Mid 40s): Teddy is the brother of Jonathan and Mortimer, and lives with his aunts Abby and Martha. A blissfully deluded man, he believes he is Theodore Roosevelt.

JONATHAN BREWSTER (Early 40s): Jonathan is, quite simply, a sociopath. Bent on turning the Brewster home into a plastic surgery clinic to change the faces of criminals, Jonathan exhibits a classic lack of empathy and a white-hot temper. Jonathan's hatred toward his brother Mortimer shows throughout the play, and his pettiness displays itself even more.

DR. EINSTEIN (40s): A German plastic surgeon, Dr. Einstein is Jonathan's alcoholic doctor who has given Jonathan three face lifts to help him evade crime. While generally submissive to Jonathan, Dr. Einstein still knows how to manipulate Jonathan to get his way.

OFFICER O'HARA (30s): A kind and good-natured police officer, O'Hara has a passion for playwriting and pesters Mortimer to read his play. O'Hara is incredibly persistent, but never means to be, and would consider himself respectful.

OFFICE BRODY (Any age): Pleasant neighborhood police officer who is doing the rounds collecting toys for children.

OFFICER KLEIN (Male, any age): Officer Brophy's police partner, Klein is also a kindly officer who has gotten to know the Brewster sisters.

LIEUTENANT ROONEY (50s): The head of the local precinct, Lt. Rooney is a commanding man with a short temper. He is large and in-charge, unafraid to speak up and control any situation at hand.

MR. WITHERSPOON (50s-60s): Mr. Witherspoon is the mild-mannered superintendent of Happy Dale Sanitarium.

MR. GIBBS (Male, 60s): A gruff older man who comes to the Brewster home in search of lodging, who narrowly escapes getting poisoned by the sisters

Cast

The cast of this production only includes 12 actors. Therefore, at least one actor may be required to play more than one role.

Look at the descriptions on this page and think about how you might choose a cast to portray these characters.

What physical characteristics would you look for in the actor playing each character? Why?

What vocal quality would you expect each character to have? Would they speak slowly, quickly, gravelly, squeaky?

Which roles might be shared by one actor? How would you make each character unique?

Theatre Etiquette and House Rules

It goes without saying that when most children today hear the word “theatre” they think, “oh, MOVIE theater.” And with that thought comes all of those things that we do at movie theater: eat popcorn, drink noisily from soda cups, put feet on the seat, text message—and the list goes on from there.

But live theater is just that: it’s LIVE with LIVE HUMANS who react and respond to the audience, something that we at Prime Stage think is the beauty of the theatre experience. Because of this, live theatre requires a higher level of respect between the audience and performer in order for the experience to be a positive one. As an audience member, you are the final and most important component of this production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*!

Please review the following “house rules” with your students prior to attending our production:

- Please stay together with your group and wait for an usher to help you find your seat.
- Please turn all cell phones **completely off** before the performance. If you are texting during the performance, you will be asked to leave. (FYI, the theater will be dark, and light from your phone shines up on your face when you text. Everybody, including the actors on stage, can see you!)
- No photography or videotaping.
- Please stay in your seat until the intermission or the end of the play.
- No eating, drinking, or chewing gum during the performance.
- We encourage active listening and appropriate responses such as laughing or clapping. Please do not talk during the performance!
- Be polite and attentive. Show your appreciation by clapping. (FYI – the actors really love to see how much you enjoyed the show!)

PDE Academic Standards 1.6, 9.1

Thinking Like a Critic

Critics play an important role in theatre. They are often the first to see the show and can write a wonderful – or horrendous – review for all the world to see. Prepare your students to attend the show by “thinking like a critic.”

Read the following questions before the show.



Think about the questions as you’re watching the show and write your answers in a notebook or journal during intermission or on the bus ride home.

Write a critique of the show based on your responses.

PDE Academic Standards 9.1-9.4, 1.4- 1.5

Actor choices—How did they move and speak? Did they seem like people we know? How did they relate to other characters?

Designer choices—What design element captured your attention the most - the set, costumes, lights, or sound - and why? How did the design elements work together to support the entire production? What choices did the designers make in materials, colors, intensity, detail, etc.? What symbols were in the design elements?

Director choices—What was the style, pace, and rhythm of the play? What stage pictures helped to tell the story? How did the director unify all of the elements of the production?

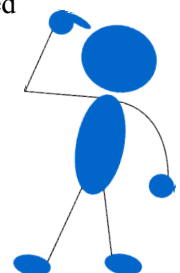
Interpretation—Did the director make a statement about life in our

current time? How did the characters, design, and play make you feel? What did the play mean to you? What might it mean to others?

Evaluation—Why do you suppose the playwright wrote the play? Why was the play produced now? When were moments where the storytelling was very clear? When were moments you were confused about the story? Who would enjoy the play and why?

Remember—it’s all about choices!

Whether you loved the play or not, identify the specific choices that made you feel that way!



Behind the Scenes with Prime Stage Theatre

Directors, actors and production teams have to make many decisions when they bring a play to life. All those working behind the scenes must consider what emotions, images, sounds or movements to highlight from the play and how to portray them on stage. It is an exciting and collaborative experience.



Meet the Director

Arsenic and Old Lace is directed by Prime Stage favorite, Liam Macik. Liam is a Pittsburgh native and graduate of Mount Lebanon High School. He received his B.A. in Theatre Arts from Catawba College in Salisbury, NC. Liam served as the founding Artistic Director of Throughline Theatre Company for seven years, where his directing credits include productions of *Judgement at Nuremberg*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. In 2005, Liam received the Peterson Award for Emerging Playwrights for his play, *Bastards and Fools*, and in 2019 Liam wrote and directed a new adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter* for Prime Stage. In addition to playwriting and directing, Liam is an established stage actor, most recently appearing as

Lenny in *Of Mice and Men* at Prime Stage, and previously as David Sarnoff in *The Farnsworth Invention* and Beverly Weston in *August: Osage County*, both at Throughline Theatre. This is Liam's second time directing *Arsenic and Old Lace* and his second time directing with Prime Stage.

Prime Stage Education was delighted to interview Liam Macik about his role as the director and his experience with *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

How would you describe your role and responsibilities as the director for *Arsenic and Old Lace*?

As Director it's my job to orchestrate all of the elements of the play into a cohesive production. I work closely with the actors, setting their movements around the stage and helping them fine-tune their performances. It's a lot of work for an actor, creating a character on stage, and a lot of my job is to facilitate that process for them, removing any obstacles or distractions that might get in their way, and to help them all in working together. Then we add the technical elements - the costumes, set, sound, and lights - and it's my job to make sure they are all supporting each other and making each other and the production better.

Arsenic and Old Lace is one of theater's most popular plays. What was your impression when you first saw it or read it? What drew you to this production for PST?

I honestly don't remember a time when I didn't know and love this show, though my first experience with it was with the old film adaptation with Cary Grant as

Mortimer Brewster. There are some sharp differences between the film and the play which were jarring to me when I saw my first stage production of it as a child, but I quickly grew to love them both equally. It is truly one of the funniest scripts of all time. I had the privilege of directing it a number of years ago and had a great time with it, so when the opportunity came to direct it again for Prime Stage, I jumped at it.

Arsenic and Old Lace is a farce and a dark comedy set in the 1940s. What sort of research did you do and what influences inspired your direction?

This play has a number of influences, from Gothic Horror in the vein of Edgar Allan Poe, to the classic Universal Monster Movies, to the zany screwball comedies of the period in which it was produced. I tried to keep as many of those conflicting elements in this production as possible, because the clashing of those styles and the incongruity of the situations that arise from them are what drives a lot of the comedy.



Behind the Scenes

Meet the Director Continued

How is directing comedy different from directing more dramatic forms of theater?

It sounds cliché but comedy is harder. Timing is a lot more critical in comedy than in drama, as the rhythm and the beats are as essential to a joke landing as the words in the joke themselves. Comedy is also much more of a binary Pass/Fail kind of grading system than drama, where audience reaction can be a great deal more nuanced. With comedy it's pretty clear cut: if they laugh you win, if they don't you lose. The stakes of performing comedy are higher and there is a smaller margin for error.

What are you most excited for audiences to see?

I realized during the audition process that this is a play with which a lot of newer audiences are completely unfamiliar. They might have heard the title but beyond that are completely unexposed to it. Having known this script my whole life, I am jealous of anybody that doesn't know all the beats - plot points and revelations and reversals - down by heart. Knowing that somebody is going to be seeing this fresh for the first time is very exciting to me, but beyond that I don't know if I can pick a particular moment or performance in particular.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with students or teacher seeing this production?

Laugh! Have fun! This is a big, beautiful, ridiculous story and it's unbelievable silliness is why it endures through the decades and continues to engage with audiences of all ages. Sit back and enjoy!



Liam Macik gives direction to actor Lynne Franks during a rehearsal *Arsenic and Old Lace*; PST 2022



Suzanna Ward and Lynne Franks as Martha and Abby Brewster in *Arsenic and Old Lace*; PST 2022

Discuss: If YOU were the Director...

What is a theme from the play that you'd want your audience to think about when they leave the theater?

What subjects would you want to research?

How might you portray the comedy?

Which characters do you enjoy the most and how do you think your feelings might affect the way you portray the characters in your version?

Behind the Scenes



Meet the Stage Manager

Arsenic and Old Lace is stage managed by Britt Kolek. Britt is a recent graduate of the University of Mount Union (OH) where she earned bachelor's degrees in theatre and English. She has previously worked with Prime Stage in an Assistant Stage Manager role in their production of *A Wrinkle in Time*. She is thrilled to be back stage managing for an incredible cast and a wonderful company that brings her loves of literature and theatre together. When Britt is not stage managing, she is writing and was recently showcased in the Tribune Review for her fifth self-published piece, a novel entitled *Raging*. She has self-published five pieces in the last five years and has three available for purchase while the other two are

actively being revised. To purchase her books or follow her writing journey, you can go to bekolek.weebly.com.

Prime Stage recently sat down with Britt to learn more about the job of a stage manager and her process for *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

What does a stage manager do?

A stage manager is a person who communicates between the designers, the director, and the actors to help effectively translate the ideas for a show into reality. I also believe one of the main jobs of a stage manager is to make sure their cast is safe both physically and emotionally throughout the rehearsal and performance process. Stage managers also handle things like blocking notes, line notes, prop tracking, costume tracking, mic checks, scene changes, costume changes, and calling the show.

Are there any specific responsibilities that you have as stage manager for *Arsenic and Old Lace* that you might not have for other productions?

Yes. I am the production's fight captain. Which is a position delegated by the fight choreographer. Similar to how a stage manager writes down all of the blocking notes from a director, a fight captain writes down all of the moves of a fight or struggle. They also run fight call. Which is a scheduled block of time before rehearsals and performances where the fight captain watches each fight as it is done three or four times at increasing speed to make sure the blocking is being followed, everyone is feeling good and safe. This is really important to address any injuries an actor might've suffered off stage and make sure the fight feels safe and controlled. Plus it gets the choreography back in an actor's body so that the first time they do it isn't on stage in front of an audience.

What is it like to collaborate with the actors, director, production crew and designers?

It's great! One of my favorite aspects of theatre is the collaboration.

I find that I learn new things about the show every time I talk to designers and see what they took from the script. I have a background in technical theatre so I have some classroom experience in most design aspects and I find myself nerd-ing out a little bit when discussing the set or ideas for lighting with the designers or even the cast. When explaining the ground plan or the rendering to them I do sometimes get a little carried away explaining things like why doors open the way they do. Or why set dressing makes the house seem homey but not necessarily cluttered. I'm a bit of a nerd in that sense. I really love learning about every aspect of theatre so every time with designers I try to take something new away.



Actors and crew gather for the first read-through of *Arsenic and Old Lace*; PST 2022

Behind the Scenes

Meet the Stage Manager Continued

The actors and director are incredible. They are so fun to work with. I look forward to rehearsal every day because of them. There is such of natural meshing of personalities. I feel Liam (our director) has a very organic directing style which lends itself really well to not just stage managers, who are taking the blocking down, but to the actors who find new choices to make within the blocking and are free to try them. This is probably the first cast that I've seen really try different emphasizes on lines or different deliveries of lines or even just a word. It's always unexpected and it's amazing to hear laughter from, not just us at the table, but the actors waiting in the wings. It's a really fun, respectful, and collaborative environment which is all you can ask for as a stage manager.

I really feel, from all aspects of production, that we're all in the same headspace, we all know what we're making and it's coming along really well. That is exactly what you want as a stage manager because it means communication is happening effectively and there is a singular and clear vision of what we want to happen.

Arsenic and Old Lace is one of theater's most popular plays. What was your impression when you first saw it or read it? What excites you about this production for PST?

The first time I heard it was at the Read Thru. As someone with an English and a theatre background I'm surprised it took me this long to get to it but I fell in love with the play instantly. I'm really glad the first time I heard it was at the Read Thru because it really sold the comedy. To be in a room full of people who were also laughing made the experience so much more enjoyable and really made the comedic moments stand out. It's got a lot of things I enjoy in theatre. Big physical comedy and opportunity for small subtle jokes. I think what excites me most is the cast and Liam's direction. The cast has great comedic timing and Liam has a great subtly in blocking scenes to parallel each other which I love to see. I think people always think theatre is about the big grand gestures because, unlike film, you're playing to a larger space but theatre can and does open itself up for subtlety and I'm excited for all of the small aspects that can get just as big of laughter as the huge physical comedy pieces.



Set rendering of *Arsenic and Old Lace* by set designer Jonmichael Bohach; PST 2022

Behind the Scenes

Elements of a Production

A play or musical is much more than the two hour show the audience sees. The production process often takes many months, even years, to complete and requires many skilled people.

Creative Team

Every play or musical starts from the imagination or inspiration of the authors. Many times an idea for a show grows from an existing book, play, article, or movie. Other times, authors write an original story or concept. Once an idea is developed, the play writing begins. A dramaturg may be brought on to provide vital knowledge, research, and interpretation along with a director to help guide to overall artistic vision of the show. Once a production is scheduled, a stage manager will be brought on to manage all aspects of the rehearsal and performance.

Cast

The director works with the casting agent or theater company to cast the characters. Each performer must have acting skills and fit the look of his /her character. These elements are all evaluated during the audition process. Actors are generally asked to prepare a monologue or scene from the play and bring a headshot as well.

Rehearsal

The cast will do an initial read-through of the script, followed by daily rehearsal. During rehearsals, the director coaches the actors' reading of the lines and emotions, and also gives them their blocking, line by line, scene by scene. A technical rehearsal is when the full cast and crew walk through the entire show, ensuring every light cue, sound effect, microphone, etc. works as planned. This rehearsal is mainly for the tech staff. The cast and crew will also get a dress rehearsal, many times more than once, to bring all of the different elements (costumes, lights, sounds, movement) together.

Sound

The sound designer plans the layout of all sound playback and equipment for the show, and adjusts the pitch, volume, duration, and overall quality of the music to meet each specific scene's needs. The sound operator executes the sound designer's plans and handles the mixing equipment for the show. The adjustments are

made using the soundboard. The sound effects designer is responsible for creating or enhancing sounds distinct from music and dialogue, such as doorbells or running water.

Lights

Lighting design goes beyond simply making sure that the audience can see the stage. A lighting designer's job is to make deliberate decisions about what the audience sees in the stage space. Light can be used to establish the time or location of a performance, or to create and enhance mood and atmosphere. A lighting technician hangs and adjusts the lighting instruments according to the lighting designers plans while the designer programs the light cue changes on a computer.

Scenic

The set designer's job is to design these physical surroundings in which the action will take place. A theater set should: suggest the style and tone of the whole production, create mood and atmosphere, give clues as to the specific time and place of the action, and offer creative possibilities for the movement and grouping of the actors. The designer will create a scale model and a rendering with technical plans so that the builders can start making the set. Sometimes the set designer helps to build the as well.

Costumes

The costume designer first researches the setting of the play and the characters. Costumes must be appropriate for the time period and vision of the show, and simultaneously be practical enough to allow for movement. They decide which styles and fabrics to use, and draw up the costumes in renderings. Through costume fitting, they may tailor adjustments for each performer.

Audience

At the front of the theater, audience members will see a marquee displaying the name of the show being performed. After purchasing tickets at the box office and entering the theater, audience members will receive a program, which provides information about the show and actors' biographies. An usher escorts them to their seats. Some shows may have an intermission. When the show ends, audience members will applaud and give a standing ovation if they feel the show was exceptionally good. The house manager oversees aspects of the audience, including supervising the ushers and contacting the stage manager about any audience delays for starting the show.



PST's production of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, 2017

Adaptations of *Arsenic and Old Lace*



Arsenic and Old Lace premiered on Broadway at the Fulton Theatre on January 10, 1941. The play starred character actors Josephine Hull, Jean Adair, and horror film star Boris Karloff. It closed on June 17, 1944.

Photo of Boris Karloff as Jonathan Brewster from the original Broadway production.

Actors (L-R) Marion Ross, Jean Stapleton, Jonathan Frid & Larry Storch in a scene from the Broadway revival



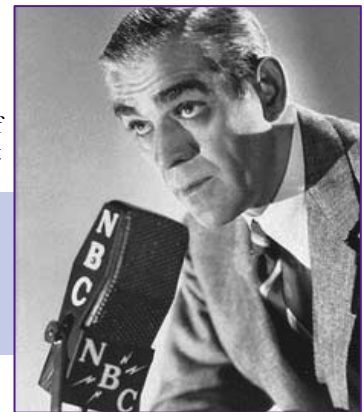
Arsenic and Old Lace was revived on Broadway on June 19, 1986 at the 46th Street Theatre. This version starred character actors Jean Stapleton and Polly Holliday, as well as veteran actor Abe Vigoda. It closed on January 3, 1987.



In 1944, director Frank Capra made *Arsenic and Old Lace* into a highly successful film starring Cary Grant and Priscilla Lane. The script was adapted by brothers Julius and Phillip Epstein. The movie was actually filmed in 1941, however, it was not released until the play ended its run on Broadway three years later.

Photo of Cary Grant and Priscilla Lane

Photo of Boris Karloff for the 1952 broadcast



Arsenic and Old Lace was adapted into radio plays for the November 25, 1945 broadcast of The Screen Guild Theater, the January 25, 1948 broadcast of The Ford Theatre Program, and the July 6, 1952 broadcast of NBC's Best Plays Series.



Three versions of *Arsenic and Old Lace* have been produced for television. One version aired as part of The Best of Broadway in January of 1955, another version aired in February of 1962, and a third version aired in April of 1969.

Photo of Lillian Gish, Bob Crane and Helen Hayes in the 1969 television adaptation.

Putting it in Context

The Inspiration for Arsenic and Old Lace

While working on *Arsenic and Old Lace*, playwright Joseph Kesselring traveled to Connecticut to examine court documents relating to Amy Archer-Gilligan, a convicted murderer who had run a boarding house for the elderly. The residents of the facility would receive a lifetime of care in exchange for lump sum payments or signing over their life insurance policies. Sixty-six people died at that house between 1908 and 1916.

Amy and her husband, James, had opened the Archer Home for Aged People in 1907. James died in 1910, but by that time Amy had established herself as a fixture in Windsor. She was active in the town's affairs and even donated a stained-glass window to the church. However, her involvement in town affairs did not keep others from noticing the abnormally large amounts of arsenic she purchased to control a supposed rat problem at the home.

In 1913, Amy married Michael Gilligan, but he died just three months into their marriage. His death was one of 60 deaths that occurred at the home between 1907 and 1916. There was no investigation until she was linked to a particularly suspicious death. Franklin Andrews died suddenly after being seen the day before doing yard work in seemingly perfect health. When his sister went through his papers after his death, she found information regarding a \$500 loan to Amy. Amy was arrested in May of 1916. During the four week trial, authorities exhumed the bodies, including that of her second husband. Autopsies revealed that he and more than two dozen of Gilligan's former residents had been poisoned with arsenic or strychnine.

Amy Archer-Gilligan was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. In 1924, the state transferred her to the Connecticut General Hospital for the Insane in Middletown, where she remained until her death in 1962.

Information sourced from <https://www.history.com/news/arsenic-old-lace-real-murders>



Detail of the Hartford Courant coverage of Amy Archer-Gilligan's arrest, May 9, 1916.

Did you know?

The original version of Kesselring's play was a melodrama/ horror entitled *Bodies in our Cellar*. Broadway producers Howard Lindsey and Russel Crouse read the script and thought it would work better as a comedy. Before putting it on the Broadway stage, the producers reworked the script, and they changed the title to *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

The title *Arsenic and Old Lace* comes from the term *Lavender and Old Lace*; a phrase used during the Victorian era to describe the homes of genteel ladies that were decorated with lace curtains, lace dollies, and smelled of lavender.



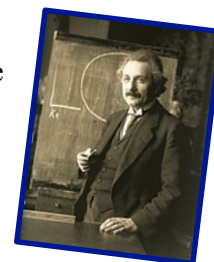
Putting it in Context

The World in 1939-1941

Arsenic and Old Lace is set in the living room of the Brewster family home, which is located in Brooklyn, New York. The time period is the “present”, which in this case indicates the year the play was written, 1941. At this time, World War II was raging in Europe and Americans feared that the United States would be pulled into it. The World’s Fair has just taken place in New York and the Brooklyn Dodgers were facing the New York Yankees in the World Series.

August 2, 1939

Physicists Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard send a letter to President Roosevelt urging the United States to invest time and money into the secret development of nuclear weapons before Germany developed the technology first.



August 25, 1939

The beloved film starring Judy Garland *The Wizard of Oz* premieres.

September 1, 1939

Germany invades Poland, starting World War II.

June 4, 1940

The Battle of Dunkirk was a huge military loss for the Allies. However, the evacuation, or "Miracle of Dunkirk" was a success.



February 29, 1940

Hattie McDaniel becomes the first African-American to win an Academy Award.

July 18, 1940

Franklin D. Roosevelt wins the election and becomes the United States' first third-term president.

March 1941

The first Captain America comic book was published.



May 1, 1941

Orson Welles' film *Citizen Kane* premieres in New York City.
The first Series E "War Bonds" and Defense Savings Stamps go on sale in the United States to help fund the greatly increased production of military equipment.

November 26, 1941

U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signs a bill establishing the 4th Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day in the United States (this partly reverses a 1939 action by Roosevelt that changed the celebration of Thanksgiving to the third Thursday of November).

December 7, 1941

Attack on Pearl Harbor: The Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service stages a military strike on the United States Navy fleet at Pearl Harbor in the Territory of Hawaii, thus drawing the U.S. into World War II.



December 8, 1941

Franklin Roosevelt gives his Infamy Speech to a joint session of Congress.
Within an hour the United States declaration of war on Japan is signed.

Putting it in Context

The People, Places and Things

Arsenic and Old Lace features many people, places, and things that were popular in 1941, but they may not be as well known today. Below is a glossary of some important items that will help readers better understand the world of the Brewster home. **Ask students to keep a list of other people, places, and things as they read the script.*

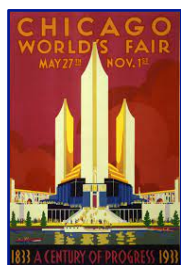


Alice Roosevelt:

Teddy, convinced that he is Theodore Roosevelt, imagines that Elaine is his eldest daughter Alice (1884-1980). Alice was nicknamed 'Princess Alice' during her father's tenure in the White House, and

became an instant celebrity. She was America's darling, strong-willed, outspoken, unconventional, and beautiful. She smoked in public, hung around with young men, gambled, and owned a pet snake named Emily Spinach - hence Teddy's admonishment that she not be a rough-housing tomboy!

Arsenic: When ingested in large doses, the symptoms of arsenic poisoning include vomiting, bloody diarrhea, burning pain, cold and clammy skin, weakness, a sweet metallic taste in the mouth, convulsions, delirium, and coma. If the victim is left untreated, circulatory failure leads to death. Used extensively in glass-making, mining, smelting and other industrial processes, arsenic is found in water, soil, or rock. In its pure form it is a white, tasteless, orderless element.



Chicago World's Fair:

Aunt Abbey and Aunt Martha remember The World's Fair in Chicago in 1933. The fair's theme was technological innovation. It

opened in May 27, 1933, on the shore of Lake Michigan and held many popular and strange exhibits.

Hunting Trip to Africa: A month after leaving office in 1908, Teddy Roosevelt went on safari in British East Africa, or what is now the Republic of Kenya. He and his son,

Kermit, shot 512 animals of 296 separate species. He donated the specimens to the Smithsonian Institute.

Judith Anderson: Mortimer orders Martha and Abby to get out of their mourning clothes, because they look like Judith Anderson. In 1941, the renowned Australian actress had just starred in Hitchcock's *Rebecca* as Mrs. Danvers, a frightening, obsessive housekeeper who dressed in all black.



Panama Canal: One of Teddy Roosevelt's most noteworthy achievements. Starting in 1904, the Canal was dug across the narrowest strip of Central America, to allow ships to pass from the Atlantic to the Pacific and back without sailing around all of South America. The interest of the United States in the region contributed to the formation of Panama as an independent state — when Colombia refused the payment Roosevelt offered for the right to build the canal, he secretly supported a revolution. Ships started sailing the canal in 1914, and the canal was officially opened in 1921.

Rumble Seat: Jonathan and Dr. Einstein have stored poor Mr. Spinalzo in the rumble seat, an exterior upholstered seat opening out from the rear of the car in place of a trunk. Rumble seats were also known as dickey seats or mother-in-law seats, and began to be phased out in America in the 1930s.

Sanitarium: Mr. Witherspoon comes to the Brewster house to take Teddy to the Happy Dale Sanitarium. A

Sanitarium is a privately run hospital for the long term treatment of various chronic ailments, both physical and/or psychological.



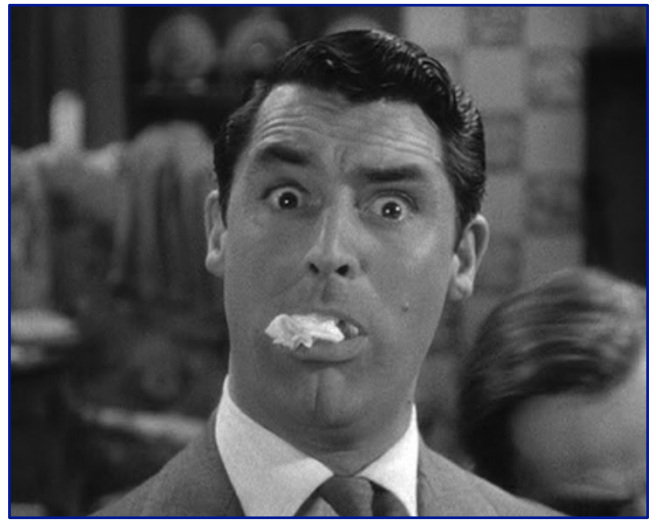
Teddy Roosevelt: Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. (1858-1919) was the 26th President of the United States, serving two terms from 1901-1909. Before coming to office after President McKinley was assassinated, he was a rancher in the Dakota Territory, a hero of the Spanish-American War, and the governor of New York. He was a historian, a lawyer, and a prolific writer; his 35 books ranged in subjects from the American frontier to naval history. He was born into a wealthy New York family, but pushed for progressive reforms thorough his political life. As President, Roosevelt spearheaded the construction of the Panama Canal and became known as a "Trust Buster." As ardent conservationist, he set aside 19 million acres of land for national parks and wildlife refuges, and urged the Congress to establish the United States Forest Service in 1905. Roosevelt won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906 for brokering the peace treaty that ended the Russo-Japanese War. Although his opponents decried him as a cowboy imperialist, his boundless energy, childlike curiosity, and wide-ranging intellectual interests won him many admirers. He remains one of the most popular presidents in history.

Putting it in Context

What is Farce and Dark Comedy?

Arsenic and Old Lace is often billed as a farce and a dark comedy. Farce is one of the most popular and enduring types of comedy in theatre. Aristophanes used elements of farce in his Ancient Greek comedies. Farce as its own genre started as comical interludes in religious plays in the Middle Ages and made its way into full length plays by the 15th century.

These comedies are characterized by the absurdity of over the top characters, the improbable situations they face, and the ridiculous obstacles that get in their way. The major tropes in farce include mistaken identity, miscommunication between characters and interactions just barely missed, usually due to the multiple doors in and out of the room in which the scene is set.



Cary Grant in the film version of *Arsenic and Old Lace*

The goal of farce is simply to make the audience laugh rather than to evoke thought or feeling. Farce is generally fast paced and pushed along by a character's panic, thus not really allowing time to dissect the plot, because often times it is nonsensical or lacking. Even in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, nothing that is going on really makes sense. Upon finding a dead body in his aunts' window seat, Mortimer leaves the house with the body still in the living room. In the middle of his mad dash to get his brother, who has not killed anyone, committed so his aunts don't get arrested for murders they did actually commit, he takes the time to stop and watch the first act of a play. While he's gone, Abby and Martha are almost more concerned about Jonathan coming to the funeral of a person none of them knew than the fact that they have a violent murderer in their house. A murderer who just happened to bring his own dead body along with him. And around all of this is Teddy Roosevelt going about his presidential duties in Panama. But we're so caught up in the ride that it doesn't matter if it doesn't make sense, we're laughing.

In addition to being a great example of farce, *Arsenic and Old Lace* is a prime example of a more modern form of comedy, dark comedy, also known as black or gallows comedy.

Dark comedy takes something morbid or taboo, (like poisoning innocent men and burying them in the basement), and makes light of it. This type of humor relies on the audience's cynicism and skepticism. While it can encompass any number of topics, death and murder do seem to be the most popular themes in dark humor. Dark comedy often makes use of farcical elements in order to make light of the heavy subject matter. A play about two women who poison their boarders and then make their delusional nephew carry the bodies to the basement, being taken hostage in their own home by their sadistic nephew does not sound particularly funny. But add in a third nephew frantically trying to save the otherwise saint-like aunts from prison while constantly being interrupted by the phone, his new fiancé, work responsibilities, and an over eager would-be playwright police officer and suddenly it's not nearly as morbid.

Information sourced from <https://taproottheatre.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Arsenic-and-Old-Lace-Play-Guide.pdf>

Putting it in Context

Themes

A theme is a universal idea, lesson, or message explored throughout a work of literature. All works of literature have themes. The same story can have multiple themes, and many different works of literature explore the same or similar themes.

Arsenic and Old Lace contains many rich themes for exploration and discussion. Listed below are some prominent themes from the novel with supporting statements. Use these statements to spark discussion or debate with your class.

Insanity/Madness

In 1941, many people believed that if one member of a family was “mad”, there was an excellent chance that the rest of the family would be mad as well. This play uses this theme extensively, and takes it to the extreme by portraying every member of the Brewster family (and referring to previous generations) as being insane on one level or another. The single exception to this is Mortimer who, although he actually acts “crazier” in several scenes than any of the other characters in the play, is revealed at the end to be adopted. The audience is left with the idea that as he is not a Brewster, he is not insane.

The insanity in the Brewster family is portrayed on a number of levels ranging from Jonathan’s manically

You see, insanity runs in my family ...
It practically gallops!

- Act 2 of *Arsenic an Old Lace*

homicidal anger when the fact that he looks like Boris Karloff is mentioned, to Teddy’s more benign – but all-consuming – belief that he is Theodore Roosevelt. Although Abby and Martha have killed as many people as Jonathan has, they are portrayed as sympathetic – and very at-risk – characters whose insanity, though deadly, is portrayed as kindness.

Some of the most hilarious of the comedic moments come from the supposedly “sane” characters acting crazy as a result of the circumstances in which they find themselves. While the most obvious victim of this is Mortimer, Officer O’Hara not freeing Mortimer and rather telling him the plot of his play for hours, as well as every other character’s unquestioning acceptance that Teddy is Theodore Roosevelt, shows a level of insanity that appears to have spread beyond the family.

Loyalty

Loyalty – sometimes misplaced – is central to the plot of this play, and is exhibited in one form or another by the major characters. Abby and Martha are fiercely loyal to Teddy – to the point of being willing to commit themselves to a sanitarium to remain with him – while Mortimer is willing to go to any lengths to cover up his aunts’ crimes. Elaine remains loyal to Mortimer, even though he spends most of the play either ignoring her, or throwing her out of the Brewster house. Even Dr. Einstein – although he does what he can to keep him from committing further murders – remains loyal to Jonathan. Jonathan is the only major character who does not show some level of loyalty, and this is part of what makes the audience consistently dislike him.

Mortimer, we know the police better than you do. I don’t think they would pry into our private affairs if we asked them not to.

- Act 3 of *Arsenic an Old Lace*

Putting it in Context

Themes Continued

Theater

In *Arsenic and Old Lace*, Mortimer Brewster is a theater critic who decides to attend a play after he learns that his aunts have been murdering lonely old men who come to their home for lodging. It is an absurd situation that playwright Joseph Kesselring uses to poke fun at theater and the people who critique it. Kesselring suggests that the theatre “reflects life only in absurd situations.” As a critic, Mortimer blames the theatre for not being realistic enough. Ironically, Mortimer fails to realize that the situation he is in is more absurd than the plays he reviews.

O’Hara: ‘Yeah, Sioux City, Iowa. I was born in the dressing room at the end of the second act, and mother made the finale.’

Mortimer: ‘What a trouper!’

- Act 2 of *Arsenic an Old Lace*

No, we don’t like to talk about Jonathan. He left Brooklyn very early – by request. Jonathan was the kind of boy who liked to cut worms in two – with his teeth.

- Act 1 of *Arsenic an Old Lace*

Murder/Death

Murder and death are also central to the plot and the play has a remarkably high body count, with 25 separate victims being listed between Jonathan and the sisters. The play starts with a murder just having been committed, and ends with one just about to be committed, although no murder is ever shown as it happens. Central to the comedy is the fact that while we view Jonathan’s murders as being crimes, we look at Abby and Martha’s killings – as do they – as kindnesses.

Charity

Although the Brewster Sisters are known for their charities, altruism is satirized in *Arsenic and Old Lace* when Abby and Martha admit that they are providing a service for the lonely gentlemen they poison by “sending them to Heaven.”

It may not be charitable of me, but I’ve almost come to the conclusion that this Mr. Hitler isn’t a Christian.

- Act 1 of *Arsenic an Old Lace*

Topics for Discussion!

The following topics may be use as writing activities or to spark discussion in class.

- Discuss the various forms of “madness” portrayed by the author in this play. Is there a difference between the madness that has caused Abby and Martha to kill 12 people and the one that has caused Jonathan to kill the same number? Do Abby and Martha have the slightest idea that what they have done is wrong? Do Abby and Martha kill Mr. Witherspoon at the end because he is unhappy, or because they want to surpass Jonathan’s “count”? Does madness run in families?
- Discuss the relationships between the members of the Brewster family. Why are Abby and Martha so fiercely loyal and protective of Teddy? Why do they have exactly opposite feelings about Jonathan? Is how they treat Mortimer at all affected by the fact that they know he is adopted? Why are they afraid he will feel bad about being adopted? Why does Teddy unquestioningly do what his aunts and Mortimer ask of him?
- Discuss the relationship between Mortimer and Elaine. Does Mortimer really love Elaine? Could he have treated her any differently than he does during the play? Is Elaine right to try and keep him after being treated so badly?

Before Activities

Prime Stage Theatre encourages students to approach literature with curiosity and personal relevance. **The activities below are intended to spark enthusiasm, interest and inquiry into the story before they have read the text or attended the performance.**

You think you're family is crazy?

In *Arsenic and Old Lace*, Mortimer's family is as crazy as they come but he goes to extreme lengths to defend them. Out of this sense of identity and family loyalty Mortimer tries to rescue his aunts from their misguided murdering while his brothers also wrestle with their own identities. The mostly innocent Teddy believes himself to be President Theodore Roosevelt and the sinister Jonathan tries to change his face to look like Boris Karloff.

Ask students to think about their family and answer the following questions in their journals.

How has your family shaped you? What do you cherish about them? How far would you actually go to protect someone in your family? And, what are you trying to keep locked in the cellar?

More discussion or journal entry prompts:

1. Have you ever helped someone get away with something wrong? Why did you do it?
2. Is there such a thing as an innocent or even a benevolent crime?
3. If you could be a different person, who would you want to be? Why?

Top of the Music Charts!

Listening to the top music singles from 1941 can help student connect to the characters and time period!

Prepare to play the following songs: "Chattanooga Choo Choo" by Glen Miller, "Boogie Boogie Bugle Boy" by The Andrew Sisters & "God Bless the Child" by Billy Holiday.

Write the title of each song on the board and play each song.

The students must use single words to describe what they hear for each song. Rather than calling the words out, they must come up and write them on the board. This is a popular game because most students love that they can get up any time they want to write a word on the board. By the end of each song there should be plenty of descriptive words.

*Ask students what types of people might be listening to these songs in the 1940s.



Arsenic and Old Lace Internet Scavenger Hunt!

Before reading the play ask students to collect information that will help them better understand the Brewster family and the people/places that exist inside of their slightly twisted world.

Students may work individually or be assigned a subject and split into groups to find the answers. Have students present their findings to the class.

Students may use their laptops or tablets in class!

- Teddy Roosevelt's appearance
- The location of the Panama Canal and information about how it operates
- A description of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders
- Information about the clothing and styles of the Victorian Era for women
- Information about General Goethals that includes his full name, job description, date of birth and date of death
- Information about Elderberries
- Information about the effects of arsenic poisoning, as well as any antidotes

During Activities

Prime Stage Theatre encourages students to make personal connections to literature through meaningful, interactive exploration of the text and themes. **The activities below are intended to enliven, clarify and enrich the text as they read the play.**

Act It Out!!!

Have students choose a scene from the *Arsenic and Old Lace* and “act it out.”

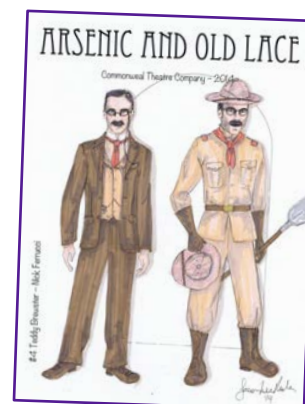
1. Discuss the setting and what is happening in the scene. How might the class prepare the scene? Where should the stage be? What props or costumes are necessary? Can students provide design elements including sounds effects, lighting cues and music?
 2. Assign parts to volunteers! These parts can include reading the stage directions, character roles, and even sound and lighting effects.
 3. Rehearse and perform the scene. (Remember to follow those stage directions and work together!)
- *For an added challenge consider adding dramatic instrumental music to underscore important moments in this scene.

Design Elements

Costumes: Have students design costumes for a character using lines and descriptions from the play as the basis of their choices. Their designs should include drawings, reasons for their choices, fabric swatches, and examples of lace trim, or notions that might be used.

Scenic Design: Have students design the set for the play. This can be challenging, and is an especially good assignment for upper level technical students because the set requirements are so detailed and so extensive. Have students submit either a drawing and floor plan or a to-scale model of their design.

Props: Have students devise a properties list for the show or for certain scenes from the show. After accumulating the list, have them provide pictures or drawings of time-period appropriate properties on their lists.



Commonwealth Theatre Co.
“Teddy” costume sketch



Write a Letter

Have students choose a character, and write a letter from that character to a friend, detailing the “events” that occurred over the years at the Brewster house. The letter could be turned in as a written project, or it could be read aloud.

Arsenic and Old Lace II

Ask students to write a short one-scene “sequel” to the play in which they reunite some of the characters for a holiday celebration or family dinner. Students may write individually or in small groups. Have student volunteers read the “sequel” out loud!

During Activities

Character Analysis of a “Brewster” from *ARSENIC AND OLD LACE*

Directions: Choose one of the Brewster family members and answer the questions about him or her as an observer.

1. What unusual or “quirky” behaviors does your character display?
2. What descriptors or adjectives are used by Kesselring or others to define your character?
3. What is your character’s physical description?
4. What actions does your character engage in that seem to be customary or expected?
5. What angers, upsets, frustrates, or aggravates your character? What does your character do when he/she is agitated?
6. What do your character’s lines reveal about his/her personality?
7. How does your character react to or deal with dead bodies?
8. What do your character’s main goals or objectives appear to be?
9. How does the “place” define your character?
10. Describe the relationships that your character has.

*If your character is Mortimer, what relationship does he have that other Brewsters do not?

*If you aren’t Mortimer, what relationship do you “lack” that was customary in the 1930s?

After Activities

Prime Stage Theatre encourages students to reflect on their learning. **The activities below are intended to provide opportunity to synthesize the learning and make personal meaning after they have read the play or attended the performance.**

Reflection Snapshots

Create a frozen picture or tableau of favorite moments from the play.

After your students attend the performance, ask your them to recall highlights by using their bodies to create frozen “snapshots” of what they saw. Prompts may include: Show me a moment when Mortimer Brewster was afraid, when he was happy. Show me a moment that surprised you. As students create the moment, ask them to explain their ideas. Pay attention to physical details such as posture or facial expression. Discuss in detail how the actor used physicality to bring the characters to life.

Poster Dialogue

Invite students to reflect about their experience seeing a performance of *Arsenic and Old Lace* Explain that there are posters with different prompts around the room. Students will travel around the room, responding to these prompts. With a verbal prompt, or when music played in the background stops, they will move to the next poster. As they travel to different posters, they may notice that their peers have already written down their thoughts. Invite students to place a star or checkmark near comments in which they agree.

Poster prompts examples:

- A moment from the play that I’m still thinking about is...
- A moment that surprised me is...
- A question I still have is...
- I’d want to have a conversation with (Character, Playwright, Creative Team) about...
- A word or phrase to describe *Arsenic and Old Lace* is ..

After students have made their way around the room, read responses from each poster aloud to the group, and invite students to discuss their responses.

Reflection Questions: What are the big ideas or themes that you see on this poster? What idea(s) do you see noted more than once? What questions do we still have as a group? Would anyone like to respond to these questions?

Extension

Invite students to write a letter to the creative team of *Arsenic and Old Lace* expressing their thoughts about the production and asking any questions they still have about the play or the performance.

Discussion or journal entries prompts.

Students can answer the following questions after seeing the performance.

1. What emotion(s) did the performance make you feel? Describe the scene that stirred your emotions.
2. How did the Sound and Lighting add meaning to the performance?
3. How did the play end? How would you change the ending?
4. Is there a part of the performance you would change? What would you change (script, lighting, music, set, costumes, etc)?
5. What five words best describe the performance?
6. What skills and knowledge are needed to create a performance?



Improvisation and Theater Games for the Classroom

Actors have to think fast on stage and trust each other to remember lines and hit their marks. Try these fun acting games and activities teach valuable theatre skills while allowing students to have fun, build confidence, stretch their imagination and grow as an ensemble.

8 Count Shake Down

1. Count 1-8 while shaking your left hand then right hand then left foot, then right foot.

If you have a group of people, it works best to stand in a circle.

Left hand shake - "1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8" Right hand shake - "1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8"

Left foot shake- "1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8" Right foot shake- "1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8"

2. You do the sequence again but this time count up to 7.

3. You repeat this decreasing every time.

4. On the last set of 1 you jump up and shout out "shake down!"

Zip, Zap, Zop

Zip, Zap, Zop is about focus and energy. As students pass the energy across the circle (in the form of a Zip, a Zap, or a Zop), they make eye contact with the person they send the energy to, and work together to keep the rhythm going. The activity also provides an opportunity to explore pace, specificity of choice, "energy" and sequence. Invite students to stand in a circle. Ask the group to repeat the words "Zip, Zap, Zop" three or four times, all together. Introduce the activity: Imagine that I have a bolt of energy in my hands.

To start the game, I will send the bolt out of energy out of my body with a strong forward motion straight to someone else in the circle (use hands, body, eyes, and voice to make contact across the circle) and say, "Zip." Explain that the next person takes the energy and passes it immediately to someone else saying "Zap." That person passes it on to another participant with a "Zop." The game continues and the "Zip, Zap, Zop" sequence is repeated as the energy moves around the circle. Encourage all plays to use their whole body to send energy and to make eye contact. They can send the energy to whomever they want but the goal is to include all players. Practice the game. If there is a mistake, encourage students to simply resume playing without discussion.

The group challenge is to go very quickly and stay consistent in rhythm; if students struggle, pause the game, discuss strategy and try again.

Two-Headed Monster

A simple game that helps students work together and be creative at the same time.

1. Ask two student volunteer to take the stage and link arms.

2. They are now a Two-Headed Monster. As a Two-Headed Monster, they talk in one-word turns, keeping the same personality.

4. Ask the class for a suggestion of an "object" or "place".

5. The monster must tell a story about that object or place, making it up as they go along.

6. After the monster has finished the story. Students may ask the monster questions.

Encourage the students to tell a story that has a beginning, middle and end.

Encourage the students to make a strong physical and character choice for their monster.

The "two-headed monster" can be used within any other improv activity.

Research shows that using games in teaching can help increase student participation, foster social and emotional learning, and motivate students to take risks!



If this play has piqued your interest, why not check out a book or movie and explore more? Your public libraries have many online resources you can access from home through online services Libby, Hoopla, or Flipster! Check your library's website for help in getting started or use this handy link: [Your Library From Home](#).

Movies

Bringing up Baby

Harried paleontologist David Huxley (Cary Grant) has to make a good impression on society matron Mrs. Random (May Robson), who is considering donating one million dollars to his museum. On the day before his wedding, Huxley meets Mrs. Random's high-spirited young niece, Susan Vance (Katharine Hepburn), a madcap adventuress who immediately falls for the straitlaced scientist. The ever-growing chaos -- including a missing dinosaur bone and a pet leopard -- threatens to swallow him whole.

Little Shop of Horrors

Meek flower shop assistant Seymour (Rick Moranis) pines for co-worker Audrey (Ellen Greene). During a total eclipse, he discovers an unusual plant he names Audrey II, which feeds only on human flesh and blood. The growing plant attracts a great deal of business for the previously struggling store. After Seymour feeds Audrey's boyfriend, Orin (Steve Martin), to the plant after Orin's accidental death, he must come up with more bodies for the increasingly bloodthirsty plant.

Knives Out

The circumstances surrounding the death of crime novelist Harlan Thrombey are mysterious, but there's one thing that renowned Detective Benoit Blanc knows for sure -- everyone in the wildly dysfunctional Thrombey family is a suspect. Now, Blanc must sift through a web of lies and red herrings to uncover the truth.

Books

***All's Well* by Mona Awad**

From the critically acclaimed author of *Bunny*, a darkly funny novel about a theater professor suffering chronic pain, who in the process of staging a troubled production of Shakespeare's most maligned play, suddenly and miraculously recovers.

***Nothing to See Here* by Kevin Wilson**

Kevin Wilson's best book yet—a moving and uproarious novel about a woman who finds meaning in her life when she begins caring for two children with remarkable and disturbing abilities.

***My Sister, the Serial Killer* by Oyinkan Braithwaite**

When Korede's dinner is interrupted one night by a distress call from her sister, Ayoola, she knows what's expected of her: bleach, rubber gloves, nerves of steel and a strong stomach. This'll be the third boyfriend Ayoola's dispatched in, quote, self-defence and the third mess that her lethal little sibling has left Korede to clear away...

***Poison for Breakfast* by Lemony Snicket**

This true story—as true as Lemony Snicket himself—begins with a puzzling note under his door: You had poison for breakfast. Following a winding trail of clues to solve the mystery of his own demise, Snicket takes us on a thought-provoking tour of his predilections: the proper way to prepare an egg, a perplexing idea called “tzimtzum,” the sublime pleasure of swimming in open water, and much else.

***Catch-22* by Joseph Heller**

Set in Italy during World War II, this is the story of the incomparable, malingering bombardier, Yossarian, a hero who is furious because thousands of people he has never met are trying to kill him. But his real problem is not the enemy—it is his own army, which keeps increasing the number of missions the men must fly to complete their service. Yet if Yossarian makes any attempt to excuse himself from the perilous missions he's assigned, he'll be in violation of Catch-22, a hilariously sinister bureaucratic rule: a man is considered insane if he willingly continues to fly dangerous combat missions, but if he makes a formal request to be removed from duty, he is proven sane and therefore ineligible to be relieved.

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NAME OF SCHOOL _____

EMAIL ADDRESS _____

Which part(s) of this experience you find most helpful for you and your students?

Was the guide useful to you?

Which part(s) did you find most helpful?

How can we improve the theatrical for the future?