

Artistic Director: Marc Robin

Managing Director: Aaron Young

STUDY GUIDE
for
THE FOREIGNER
by Larry Shue

Directed by *Matthew Kaylor Toronto*
Scenic Design by *Robert Klingelhofer*
Costume Design by *Beth Dunkelberger*
Lighting Design by *Bill Simmons*
Prop Design by *Debra Dunlop*
Sound Design by *Joseph Simon*
Wig & Make-Up Design by *Anthony Lascoski Jr.*
Stage Management by *Djuana M. Strauch*

Starring *James Andreassi, Zach Fischer, Jared Gertner, Warren Kelley*
Jane Ridley, Margaret Loesser Robinson, and Lou Sumrall

April 30 – May 17, 2009

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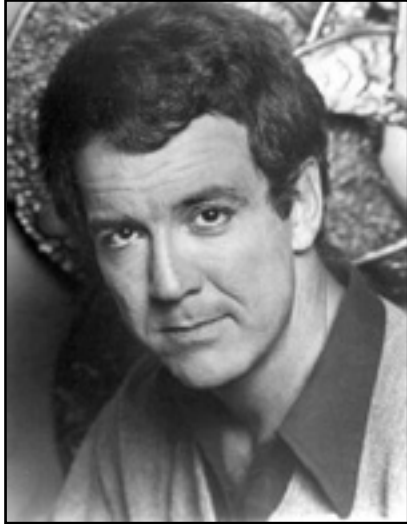
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The Playwright



Playwright, Larry Shue

When Larry Shue died in a plane crash in 1985 at the age of 39, he had only written a handful of plays, but this small oeuvre of his has left a large legacy. Although Shue considered himself an actor first, his full-length scripts *The Nerd* and especially *The Foreigner* were his shining triumphs. Even so, he never felt entirely comfortable with the writing process. A year before his untimely death, he told an interviewer “The thing that gets these plays written is stomach churning fear. They are selling the tickets for the play, so I know I must finish it. I worry about it all the time.” Still, he also went on to say that “The end result is so much fun. I try to write all the parts like I would want to play them.”

Perhaps the reason his comic works have been so successful and continue to find such eager audiences is that they appeal straight to the human experience, particularly such universal qualities as the pain of shyness and the liberating power of disguise. The playwright’s interest in these may have stemmed from his own life. A colleague once remarked: “Shue was so unfailingly funny and inventive” as an actor that “people were often surprised to discover how quiet and introverted he could be offstage.” “I’m a square,” Shue said of himself, “I stammer and stutter a lot. A real klutz, especially when I go out into the world to do a big thing, like buy a hamburger.”

Have your students consider how acting may help a very shy person. They might think of it as a means for one to escape an introverted real-life personality by losing oneself in the identity of an imaginary character on the stage. One’s timid side could be disguised by that of the performer who has the power to command the attention of an audience. Then ask how being a playwright might help someone who was introverted.

The Plot

We don’t want to spoil the fun for your students by revealing too much, so here is a very brief synopsis of *The Foreigner*. Painfully shy Charlie Baker is taken by a friend to a rural fishing lodge in Georgia for a much needed getaway. Terrified that he will have to engage in idle conversation with the lodge owner Betty Meeks and her guests, his friend concocts a clever ruse to save Charlie from having to speak at all. He tells Betty that Charlie is a foreigner who knows no English. As a consequence, very private conversations are carried on as if Charlie wasn’t there at all, and so the fun begins.

The plot of a play is its framework, the “What Happens.” Here are some basic plot patterns:

A fight to the finish between protagonist and antagonist

A race or contest between worthy opponents

An actual or metaphorical journey like that of the medieval knight. The protagonist is searching for his or her Holy Grail – getting closer, now distracted and delayed.

An invasion of the lives of stay-at-homes

A courtship, which is a variation of a journey.

After seeing the play, have your students discuss the plot. Does it fit into any of the above patterns. Was it believable? Why or why not? Of all the things that happened, what did they most enjoy? What made them laugh? What touched their hearts?

The Characters

The Playwright Theresa Rebeck described it this way: The plot “is like a cup. It’s the cup that holds everything together. If we don’t have a cup, everything just spills out all over the place.” And a play’s characters are the cup bearers.

The main bearer is, of course, the protagonist. And the protagonist of *The Foreigner* is its title character, Charlie Baker. He begins the play as a man paralyzed by his pathological shyness, a sense of himself as “shatteringly, profoundly – boring.” He wonders aloud how one even acquires a personality, and his feeling of personal insignificance results in a complete social paralysis.

But the main character of a play typically goes through the biggest changes, and this is certainly true of Charlie. Through the course of the action of *The Foreigner* he is transformed into the very opposite of his early self. By the end of the play he is in complete command of his world, capable of vanquishing enemies, winning the love of a wonderful woman, and saving a few other lives in the process. He has found an identity by assuming a staged one. As Matthew Kaylor Toronto, the director of the Fulton production has noted: “We humans are largely defined by what we believe about ourselves, but those beliefs can change significantly because of what



The Fulton cast of *The Foreigner* from left: Warren Kelley, Margaret Loesser Robinson, Jared Gertner and Jane Ridley.

Photo by Craig Leaper.

others believe about us.” Ask your students how much their sense of who they are is determined by others?

Based on the few biographical facts in this Study Guide about playwright Larry Shue, ask your students how Charlie might be a bit like his creator.

After seeing the play, have your class discuss the following: How did what the other characters came to believe about Charlie affect the way he came to believe in himself. Also, have them think about the ways Charlie had a similar impact on some of the play’s supporting characters, such as Ellard, Catherine, and Betty.

There are other characters in *The Foreigner* that reflect Charlie’s experience in different ways. Charlie is an imposter. So is David. After seeing the play, have your students compare and contrast their motivations and behaviors. Ellard, like Charlie has little self-regard at the start of the play, and Catherine doesn’t recognize her own true worth. Ask your class to compare their journeys with the one Charlie takes in the play.

The Setting

Larry Shue chose to set his play in a very rural Southern locale. After coming to the Fulton, see if your students can determine some reasons why this was a clever choice.



Georgia state flag

They might consider the limited contact the denizens of such an isolated, homogeneous community might have with foreigners, thus lending more plausibility to the plot and each of their reactions to Charlie. What are some of the attitudes that people who live in such areas might have towards foreigners in general? How are these captured in the play?

Even the specific setting of the fishing lodge serves the play by providing a source of conflict between characters, and conflict is always at the heart of a drama. You’re your class discuss the nature of that conflict and how it related to the play’s setting?

Theme & Context

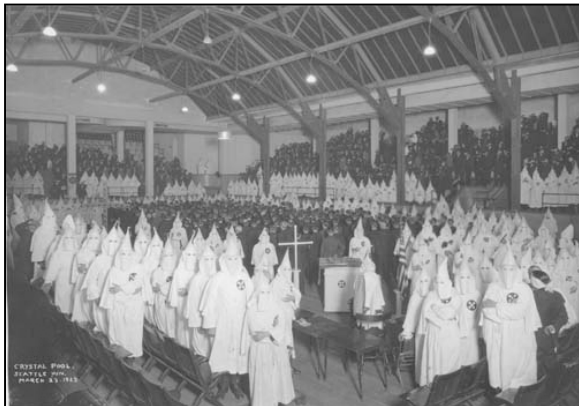
The Foreigner examines the uses of “disguise” – the assuming of a false identity – for both good and bad ends. Playwright Shue paints a vivid contrast between the affirmative power of the imagination, as exemplified by Charlie, and the diabolical power to deceive and manipulate others for selfish purposes, as depicted by the character of David.

Have your students compare and contrast their uses of “disguise.” Have them also compare what Charlie does through his “performance” with what Larry Shue does in his play. To what ends did they both use the power of imagination?

Language plays a large role in *The Foreigner*. Larry Shue was very conscious of its power and its potential pitfalls. He even had actual encounters with “foreigners” when he went to Czechoslovakia in 1974, a visit that became the basis for another of his plays, *Wenceslas Square*. This adventure helped to convince him of the unruliness of conversation in translation, and of some of the possible absurdities inherent in everyday communication.

Can your students think of occasions in their own lives in which language was an obstacle causing misinterpretations or confusions? Can they imagine what it would be like to go to a place where they didn’t understand the language at all? How would that affect their functioning? Recent immigrants may have actually experienced that. If anyone in your class has English as a second language, perhaps he or she could share some such experiences.

Charlie’s gibberish story is one of the comic highlights of *The Foreigner*. Playing with gibberish is a useful acting exercise because it trains students to be expressive with more than just their words – tone of voice, inflection, pitch, etc., certainly even body language, can help convey or confuse meaning. Have your students try to convey some simple thoughts using their own spontaneously invented gibberish. See how much information they can actually get across.



Historical photo of the Ku Klux Klan

As noted earlier, playwright Shue deliberately set his play in a very rural setting in which negative attitudes about foreigners might seem credible. *Before* seeing the play, have your class study the Ku Klux Klan to gain a better understanding of the character Owen Musser’s attitude towards foreigners. Your students might also want to discuss the controversies surrounding the illegal immigrant issues facing America today. What are some of the current points of view about foreigners coming to live in the United States?

Theatre

In a way, *The Foreigner* is a wonderful play about the theatre because Charlie is putting on a performance during the whole show, and Larry Shue’s love of the art form is evident in every page. To help your students learn more about theatre, visit the Fulton’s website at www.fultontheatre.org to find out about our 2009-10 school day matinees and outreach programs.