A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

On Golden Pond
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: Peggy Scott (top) and Richard Kinter in On Golden Pond, 2006.
On Golden Pond

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Synopsis: On Golden Pond

Norman and Ethel Thayer have recently returned to spend their forty-eighth summer at their vacation home on Golden Pond in Maine. Norman is doing his best to see that the phone is in working order, while Ethel, who has been gathering firewood, is excited at having met some of the neighbors. Norman, whose memory isn’t what it once was, is about to turn eighty and seems preoccupied, albeit humorously, with the prospect of dying.

Scene two finds Norman perusing the want ads, looking for a new “career opportunity.” Ethel suggests that he get out of the house and pick some of the wild strawberries that grow on the old town road.

Charlie, the mailman and long time family friend, arrives by boat and is invited in for coffee. Norman returns, looking a bit pale, having picked no berries. The mail includes Norman’s heart medication and a letter from daughter Chelsea, announcing that she and her boyfriend intend to stop for a visit on their way to Europe. Norman is acting less than delighted at the prospect of having so many people around to celebrate his eightieth birthday, which he is convinced will be his last. Norman confesses the reason for his hasty return from berry picking. He became disoriented in the woods and panicked.

Chelsea and her boyfriend Bill arrive, having brought Bill’s thirteen-year-old son, Billy, along. It is apparent that Bill is not the outdoors type, and Norman delights in “jerking him around” a bit as they discuss whether Bill and Chelsea should share a bedroom that night. Norman agrees, a bit reluctantly, that young Billy can stay a month while Bill and Chelsea are in Europe.

Act Two reveals that Norman and Billy have formed a close, perhaps even loving relationship and are trying to sneak away for yet another day of fishing. The month has passed and Chelsea returns, announcing that Bill, whom she married in Brussels, has gone on to California. Chelsea, unable to let go of her unhappy past, tells her mother she never really ever had her father’s approval. She envies the relationship that Billy apparently has with Norman. Finally alone with Norman, Chelsea tries to explain her feelings to him and they agree to see each other more often and to try a bit harder to understand each other. Charlie comes by for some reminiscing, and Chelsea agrees to accompany him sometime on his mail-delivery-by-boat route.

In the end, the Thayers are reluctantly leaving Golden Pond at summer’s end. Chelsea calls and invites them to California to spend part of the winter. Norman is a bit reticent until he speaks to Billy and promises that he will be there. While packing to leave, Norman picks up a heavy box of china, clutches his chest in pain, and drops the box. Ethel manages to locate his medication, and near panic results as she is unable to connect with the telephone operator so that a doctor can be contacted. They express their love for each other as she holds him and they realize how precious their time together is. The pain eventually subsides, and the Thayers walk arm-in-arm to bid goodbye once more to Golden Pond.
Characters: On Golden Pond

Norman Thayer, Jr.: Nearing his eightieth birthday, Norman is flirting with senility and is aware of it enough to use it to his advantage, usually in a humorous way. He is a curmudgeon, as he feels his age entitles him to be. He is very much in love with Ethel, his wife, but doesn’t quite know what to do about their daughter, Chelsea.

Ethel Thayer: Ten years younger than Norman, Ethel is a spritely, active woman who loves her husband completely and who is in love with simply being alive. She is caregiver, sweetheart, and friend to Norman.

Charlie Martin: The local delivery-by-boat mailman, Charlie is a long-time family friend and a typical Maine down-Easterner. Still single, he has had a life-long crush on Chelsea.

Chelsea Thayer Wayne: Attractive, divorced, and in her forties, Chelsea is still dealing with the lack of closeness between her and Norman. She is engaged to Bill Ray, whom she brings to meet her parents.

Billy Ray: The fourteen-year-old son of Bill Ray, he is a typical California teenager who comes to spend a month with Norman and Ethel on Golden Pond while his father and Chelsea are in Europe.

Bill Ray: Chelsea's fiancé and Billy's father, Bill is definitely not the outdoors type. He is trying his best to make a good impression on Norman and Ethel.
Ernest Thompson:
Modern Renaissance Man
By Kelli Allred, Ph.D.

Once upon a time—1979 to be exact—American theater welcomed a new star into the firmament. Born 6 November 1949, Ernest Thompson would write his way to fame through his award-winning scripts for stage and screen. Best known for writing the play On Golden Pond (1979), Ernest Thompson has come to be known as playwright, actor, screen writer, director, producer, mentor, and family man—truly a renaissance man for our season (http://www.ernestthompson.net).

His parents, Theron and Esther Thompson, raised their children in Bellows Falls, a small Vermont town where there were no strangers. When Ernest left home to attend a large university in 1967, he was quickly swallowed up in anonymity among 32,000 other students. He remembers drifting across campus one day when he saw an audition notice for Eugene O’Neill’s Ah, Wilderness! His successful audition baptized him into the world of theater, and he spent the next two years reading and re-reading the complete works of a number of playwrights (Albee, O’Neill, Williams, and Miller) in response to an English teacher’s challenge that Ernest do something with his New England work ethic. So he wrote plays, acted, and directed throughout college, graduating in 1971 (personal interview with Ernest Thompson, January 2006).

Thompson admits he spent his “draft dodging years attending a number of different colleges,” graduating from Boston University in 1971. Today Thompson’s papers are archived at Boston University’s esteemed Mugar Library, among more than 140,000 volumes of rare books and historical documents extending from the sixteenth century to the present (http://www.ernestthompson.net). All things considered, Thompson certainly qualifies as a master of modern theater, and therefore a logical choice for the Utah Shakespeare Festival stage.

In the ‘80s, Ernest Thompson wrote the drama Sweet Hearts Dance, directed by Robert Greenwald and starring Susan Sarandon and Don Johnson. In 1989 he made his film directorial debut with 1969, starring Kiefer Sutherland and Winona Ryder. During the ‘90s, he wrote and directed made-for-television movies: Take Me Home Again, The West Side Waltz, and Out of Time. In 2001, he directed his own television version of On Golden Pond, starring Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer (http://www.ernestthompson.net).

It is no coincidence that both the playwright’s father Theron Thompson and Norman Thayer—the protagonist in On Golden Pond—are retired school principals. Both Thompson’s mother Esther and the play’s Ethel fill similar roles as well: they represent the rock of familial stability and assurance. A self-proclaimed nonbeliever, Thompson writes about lost souls who do not have “the luxury of turning to deity,” so his characters must rely upon one another. Over the years, Thompson has rewritten On Golden Pond twice in an effort to “eliminate fluff . . . because the more mature writer sees the anger in the story.” He reminds us that “Alzheimer’s wasn’t a word” when he first wrote the play, and anger was newly accepted in 1978, a remnant of the Viet Nam War (personal interview with Ernest Thompson, January 2006).

The original 1979 Broadway production of On Golden Pond featured Tom Aldredge and Frances Sternhagen as Norman and Ethel Thayer spending their summer at a New England lake. The only Tony Award nomination garnered by On Golden Pond that year was for best actress, but Sternhagen did not win. After writing a third version of the play, Thompson once again was thrown into the limelight when On Golden Pond returned to Broadway in April 2005. Leonard Foglia directed the all-Black cast that starred James Earl Jones (Norman Thayer) and Leslie...
Uggams (Ethel Thayer). The revival earned two Tony Award nominations: Best Actor in a Play and Best Revival of a Play, and ran a successful three months (Internet Movie Database, 2006, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0860125/).

*On Golden Pond* was Ernest Thompson’s first screenplay to be produced and was a huge hit in 1981. The film enjoyed top box office attendance in theaters that year with over 119 million viewers, second only to Raiders of the Lost Ark (Internet Movie Database, 2006, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0860125/). Thompson was recognized internationally with an Academy Award for best screenplay adaptation, a Golden Globe Award for best screenplay in a drama, and a Writers Guild Award for best writer.

Although Thompson has never really subscribed to a collaborative approach to his craft, he remains open to the creative input of others. “We learn from each other’s mistakes,” he says as he speaks of a suggestion that Jane Fonda offered during pre-production meetings for the film. When she suggested “how great a fire” would be, Thompson went to work incorporating a fire scene into the film, a scene in which Normal accidentally sets the living room on fire (personal interview with Ernest Thompson, January 2006). The dramatic scene was effective in showing the old man’s vulnerability. Later, Thompson thanked Jane Fonda for the “fire” suggestion. She laughed and told him that she had meant a campfire, where the family could sit around roasting marshmallows. Thompson credits Fonda for the suggestion, because it gave the film credibility apart from the stage play.

Toward the end of the story, Ethel sings a sentimental tribute to the lake: “You can tell who we are by the gleam in our eyes / Our minds are clear and our hearts are strong. / We are dancing here but we won’t be long / There will soon be deer where there now are fawns. / But we’ll remember our years on Golden Pond / On Golden Pond” (Ernest Thompson, *On Golden Pond*, [New York: Dramatist’s Play Service, 1998]).

Thompson’s own mother, Esther, would later write, “It is truly wonderful to be back on Golden Pond, which is timeless, with the sparkling lake, the rustic village, the devoted loon couple and their one baby. Spring is delightful, with the new leaves, the flowers.” There can be no mistaking the sentiment of the playwright’s mother in the song that Ethel sings (http://www.ernestthompson.net).

Today Thompson lives a bi-coastal life. A small, rural New Hampshire town serves as the family’s home base, where he volunteers, observes classes at a local college, and is a favorite guest speaker. He also provides mentoring for new writers, as part owner of a small theater in Maine. Thompson and his wife, a scenic designer, live in their southern California home while Ernest continues to produce, direct, and write for television. They are the parents of three children: Heather has been accepted to the Tisch School acting program; Danielle attends the University of Georgia; and son August attends high school in Santa Monica, California (personal interview with Ernest Thompson, January 2006).

*On Golden Pond* continues to be one of the most popular and frequently staged plays in theaters across America. One recent production left Thompson feeling a new sense of his own mortality when he discovered Ethel and Norman Thayer were being played by the child star of his generation, Hayley Mills and ’60s television star Richard Chamberlain (http://www.ernestthompson.net).

On a personal note, I must add that interviewing Ernest Thompson for this article was a delight. He’s an interesting and gifted talent who remains down-to-earth as a modern husband/father. He continues to create opportunities for self expression through his persistence and commitment to writing. When I asked him where he’d like to be in 10 years, he replied “Hopefully, still living.” Let’s hope he is still around for another decade, writing, mentoring, and directing new works. Truly a modern renaissance man, his talent for artistic expression remains distinct and inspiring.
Mention this play—most commonly associated with the movie adapted from the original script—by dramatist Ernest Thompson to the majority of people and their eyes may glaze over much like the amber waters of a silent pond in Maine. The very title, On Golden Pond, conjures images of docile nature and serene isolation; and yet, like most everything else, the spirit of the play lies beneath the often deceptively composed and tranquil surface. Although the script never reaches the tragic fathoms of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, for example, similarly profound issues of a social and psychological nature are at the very heart of this play, with definite undercurrents at work, such as domestic strife and dysfunction; and the vulnerability of knowledge, of peace, and of life itself.

An early reviewer of the play from The New Yorker remarks on the “courage it must have taken for Mr. Thompson, in the 1970s, to write a play with so much affection in it” (quoted in On Golden Pond [New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1979], back cover). On Golden Pond is not, however, as artistically naïve and overemotional as one might conclude from such a statement; in fact, the play is not so much effusive as it is essential, in that it deals with the most basic feature of humankind—the heart.

The flawed hero and villain, Norman Thayer, is turning eighty; and his aging heart is arrhythmic. He and his unfaltering wife Ethel, who is ten years his junior, have returned to their summer home on Golden Pond, in Maine just as they have done for many years past. The house itself is a narrative of their life together, with memorabilia, photographs, books, and bric-a-brac marking the interior, like the dog-eared pages of a worn and well-read book. Norman is having trouble remembering things—old faces in photographs, old trails in the forest around the pond. As a learned man and a former educator, he is reluctant to see facts and details muted into shadows. Once an imposing, respected figure, Norman is frightened and unaccustomed to frailty of either mind or body. In this organic setting on Golden Pond among all the natural phenomena and living things a man battles nature’s ebbs and flows. As Joyce Carol Oates says, “Confronted with the ungovernable processes of nature, many men—and not just the baffled, infuriated Lear—imagine that their ‘wits begin to turn’” (“Is This the Promised End?” Contraries Essays [http://www.usfca.edu/fac-staff/southerr/lear.html], 13th paragraph). Ethel is Norman’s anchor, however, she is not blind to his faults: he is proud and willfully controversial, an “old poop,” really, but, for her at least, a lovable one.

Unlike her mother, Chelsea Thayer, the couple’s forty-two year old daughter, is deeply troubled by her father’s off-handed manner. As a woman, she carries the bitterness of her childhood and of what she perceives to be her father’s disapproval and regard of her: that she was not a boy and was too fat to do back-flips off the pier into the pond. She has relationship and self-image issues, and she blames Norman.

Here, also, must Thompson seem brave, as the dynamic between father and daughter is not easily or even often analyzed in artistic media. Lagretta Tallent Lenker reminds us of two other dramatists, William Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw, who “depicted the foibles of . . . fathers and daughters attempting to get the balance of their relationship right” (Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare and Shaw [Greenwood Press, 2001], 49). These attempts, however, were often comical, and though Thompson’s play refuses to be what Nietzsche calls the “art-work of pessimism,” it also declines to treat the subject too lightly or even too optimistically—settling instead, at the play’s end, for nothing more (or less) than father and daughter to become friends.

Finally, son to Chelsea’s latest love interest is thirteen-year-old Billy. Left on Golden Pond for several days while his father and Chelsea go off to get married, Billy is able to escape his own feelings of abandonment and frustration and form a significant attachment to Norman in particular. Conceivably, they are for each other a vital source of reassurance, if not hope; and this may well be the subtle moral
of On Golden Pond, as undoubtedly there is one to be had in such a sympathetic and well-inten-
tioned play. Life can and should be enjoyed regardless of the inevitabilities of nature; after all, as
the delightful Ethel solicits, “Why can’t you just pick berries and catch fish and read books, and
enjoy this sweet, sweet time?” (Act 1, Scene 2 [New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1979], 68).