Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

The
Foreigner
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 Art for The Foreigner by Cully Long.
# The Foreigner

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Synopsis: *The Foreigner*

In a rural fishing lodge in Georgia, Froggy LeSueur, a British demolitions expert who sometimes runs training sessions at a nearby military installation, is trying to put his friend, Charlie Baker, at ease. Charlie, a proofreader whose wife finds him boring, has come along for a much needed getaway. The problem is he is pathologically shy and is terrified at the prospect of having to converse with strangers at the lodge for three days.

Froggy must leave to tend to his military responsibilities, so, in an attempt to help his shy friend, he tells Betty, the owner of the lodge, that Charlie is from an exotic foreign country and neither speaks nor understands English.

Thus, conversations at the lodge carry on around Charlie much as if he weren't there at all, since it is assumed he can't understand them anyway. For example, Catherine Simms informs her fiancé, the reverend David Marshall Lee, that he isn't as sterile as he said he was and that she's pregnant.

Owen Musser, county property inspector who has been threatening to condemn the lodge, wants a private conversation with the Reverend David. In the process, Charlie overhears a plot to undermine the value of the lodge through condemnation so that David can buy it at a bargain price. In addition, Ellard Simms, Catherine's slow-witted brother, appears on the scene, and it becomes apparent that David is trying to make him appear to be an idiot so that he can't inherit his half of the family money.

Through little effort on his part, Charlie endears himself to almost everyone by being a good listener (much better than they know) as they relate their problems to him. He doesn't judge, nor does he give advice. So, Ellard tries his hand at teaching Charlie to speak English. Maybe poor Ellard isn't so stupid after all, as Charlie makes him seem to be a natural teacher.

David and Owen soon appear with a box of ledgers, records and even dynamite, apparently salvaged from a fire of some sort. Owen's van contains weapons and uniforms enough to reunite the Georgia Empire.

Froggy returns and is surprised at how well his shy friend is doing. Charlie entertains by relating a story in a strange, unintelligible dialect. Froggy agrees to return the next day, and, in private, Charlie reveals that he is having a wonderful time and may even be acquiring a personality.

Owen returns and Charlie has some fun tormenting him. David shows up with his new van, and Charlie demonstrates how well Ellard has taught him in just two days. Catherine agrees that Ellard is indeed smart enough to receive his part of the inheritance, much to the dismay of David, who decides a hasty marriage to Catherine might be in his best interest after all.

Charlie agrees to teach a bit of his “native tongue,” and has a good deal of fun at Owen and David's expense. Owen, unable to stand any further torment, rages that the Klan will soon be coming to purge the land of foreigners. As Act One concludes, the power has been cut off and the lodge is in virtual isolation and darkness as everyone turns to Charlie for a solution.

As promised, the Klan appears, torches blazing. Through a series of tricks involving Ellard, a trap door and a croquet mallet, the Klan is vanquished and David is exposed for what he really is.

Froggy returns, ready for the “vacation” and Charlie's masquerade to end. By mutual agreement, Charlie decides to stay on with his friends at the lodge as “The Foreigner” in order to teach and be taught.
Characters: \textit{The Foreigner}

\textbf{Froggy Lesueur:} A British military demolitions expert who occasionally conducts field operations in rural Georgia, Froggy is Charlie’s caring friend and devises the scheme that protects Charlie from having to interact with the other guests at the lodge.

\textbf{Charlie Baker:} A science-fiction copy editor for a book publishing house, Charlie is in his late forties, British, and is a pathologically shy little man who has a very unfaithful wife, no personality that he can think of, and a need for peace and quiet. He has accompanied his friend, Froggy to a Georgia fishing lodge much against his own better judgment.

\textbf{Betty Meeks:} The proprietor of a Georgia fishing lodge, Betty is past seventy, a widow, and a longtime friend of Froggy. She is pleasant, wise in some ways, naïve in others. She is a good-hearted, generous, “down-home” Southerner who speaks the hardy local dialect.

\textbf{Reverend David Marshall Lee:} Neither the stereotypical pallid young divinity student nor the hearty backslapping evangelist, he appears to be a regular guy, one that you would like to have on your side. He is not what he seems, however, and he is clearly the brains behind the plot he engages in with Owen Musser to get control of Betty Meeks’s fishing lodge and Catherine Simms’s fortune.

\textbf{Catherine Simms:} The very pregnant and potentially rich fiancée of the Reverend Lee, she can be a formidable force and occasionally almost too much for the good reverend to handle. She has a ready wit and a sharp tongue. She badly needs someone to talk to, and, since Charlie doesn’t bother giving advice, he suits her needs perfectly. Catherine is Ellard’s sister.

\textbf{Owen Musser:} The Tilghman County property inspector, Owen is a two-tattoo man: one of them, he may have gotten while drunk or on a dare; two of them means he went back for more. Beware of a two-tattoo man. Owen and the Reverend Lee are cooking up a plot to condemn Betty’s lodge so that it can be bought for their own nefarious purposes. Owen, we find, is the absolute stereotype of an ill-bred southern Klansman.

\textbf{Ellard Simms:} Catherine’s brother, Ellard is an agreeable young man who is a bit slow-witted. He works as a sort of handyman for Betty and needs a considerable bit of instruction in his tasks, but may not be as dull as he seems. He is due to inherit a share of the Simms family fortune, unless the Reverend Lee can convince Catherine that Ellard is too stupid to manage money, or anything else, on his own. Ellard befriends Charlie and even decides to teach him to speak English.

About the Playwright
By Rachelle Hughes
From Insights, 2005

When he died in a commuter plane crash in September 1985, at the age of thirty-nine years, Larry Shue may not have had an extensive repertoire of written work, but he did leave an impressive legacy of plays. Shue was first and foremost an actor; in fact he took roles in many of his own plays, as well as other television and theatre productions, but his shining triumphs are his full-length comic plays, The Nerd and The Foreigner. Both of these plays were successful and continue to find eager audiences in both the professional and amateur theatre.

Shue was destined for the world of the stage. He graduated cum laude from Illinois Wesleyan University, where he received a B.F.A. in 1968. After a stint in the army he began his career as a professional actor and playwright with the Harlequin Dinner Theatre in Washington, D.C. and Atlanta. It was not long before John Dillon, artistic director at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, offered a job to Shue at the Rep. Shue left the dinner theatre circuit to start a promising phase in his career. Although Shue was an experienced actor, Dillon knew Shue had written skits and short plays since his college days. He encouraged a reluctant Shue to use his writing skills. Without the loving bullying of Dillon, the world may never have seen Shue’s twisted humor and heartwarming work.

Although he was a superb playwright, Shue admitted he found the writing process unpleasant. In a 1984 interview Shue admitted, “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.” Many hours writing the comedies were spent on a bench overlooking Lake Michigan and Milwaukee’s Central Library, according to a recent article in JSONline: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (http://www.jsonline.com, November 2004).

Fortunately, he did finish both his final plays. The Nerd was first seen at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in April 1981 where Shue played the part of the architect. The Foreigner also had its premiere at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, on January 1983. It continued a long off-Broadway run.

Shue may have been a reluctant writer, but like any playwright he had his reasons for writing The Foreigner and other theatre works. Rep actor James Pickering, for whom Shue wrote the lead character in The Nerd, said, “As you can tell from Larry’s plays, he had an extremely active verbal imagination. His skill at writing comedy was hard-wired into him. It was in his DNA” (Jaques).

Shue himself revealed the real reason for writing in a 1984 interview when he said, “The end result is so much fun. I try to write all the parts like I would want to play them.” That statement sounds a lot like one of the reasons the character Charlie kept up his farce in The Foreigner.

Shue has been described as many things, including shy, funny, eccentric, and talented. He loved acting, his comic writing was surprising and a bit unpredictable, and his theatrical interests extended to fiddling with make-up, disguises, and prosthetics. He used his kitchen as a laboratory to experiment with his favorite disguise material, foam latex. His kitchen turned lab was probably one of the reasons he spent most evenings eating out at an establishment called Ma Fisher’s. Yet, the best way to know him is to see his plays. “What was really remarkable about Larry is people who know his plays really know him” (Jaques), according to friend Amlin Gray, a resident playwright at the Rep during the time Shue was a member of the company and later, after Shue’s death, his brother-in-law (he married Shue’s sister, Jackie).

Shue has a long list of acting credits that include parts in The Mystery of Edwin Drood, American Buffalo, One Life to Live, The Foreigner, and The Nerd. He also wrote and appeared in the
shorts A Common Confusion, The Land of the Blind, and Another Town. He also won two Obies and two New York Drama Critic Awards during his lifetime. His playwright credits include Siliasocles, the one-act Grandma Duck is Dead, a one-act children’s musical My Emperor’s New Clothes, and a political drama Wenceslas Square. At the time of his death, Shue was working on a film adaptation of The Foreigner for Disney.

The Foreigner: “Real life’s awful hard, sometimes . . . blasny, blasny.”

By Don Leavitt

I love The Foreigner. From the moment I read the script—as a pie-eyed senior in high school experiencing Larry Shue for the very first time—I sensed something magical about the play. It was laugh-out-loud funny, of course, but it also offered a poignancy and a relevancy that seemed both intelligent and . . . not. There was a silliness to the play—even, as some early critics suggested, a preposterousness—that defied common sense; but it was funny, dammit, and more human in its absurdity than anything theatrical I had read in a long time.

I first wrote about The Foreigner for the Utah Shakespeare Festival back in 2005, and at the time, I steered clear of my personal feelings about the play. Instead, I stuck with a purely academic overview, offering a brief synopsis, a brief history of the playwright, and a memorial of sorts for Shue, who died tragically in a 1985 plane crash at the age of 39. It was well-written and not at all engaging, but it was an easy write, taking maybe two hours from start to finish.

Today, I find myself struggling to put thoughts to paper. Thirteen years have passed since that earlier essay, and, in that time, the world has changed. This year, the Festival produces the enduring comedy in an era of extremism that seems to be touching every aspect of the human experience. The debate about immigration is only one example, but it is certainly one of the loudest. It isn’t just the fierceness of the debate, or the bombastic tone with which it is debated—it is the polarity of positions and opinions that strains reason. Watching politicians, pundits and late-night comedians prattle on about who said what, who’s desirable, what’s American and what isn’t is like watching an intense tug-of-war that you sense has crossed from innocent fun, and you watch with baited breath, quite sure that someone’s going to get hurt.

In such an environment, it is tempting to take The Foreigner too seriously. I could hold the play aloft like a banner of artistic superiority and proclaim it an indictment of discrimination and anti-immigration rhetoric. I found myself writing very serious sentences about the state of the world and the juxtaposition of The Foreigner and its farcical tone against a political landscape that has become absolutely absurd in how seriously it takes itself. I got bogged down somewhere between brilliance and inanity—hoist on my own petard, as the saying goes—and absolutely hated every word of it.

Desperate for inspiration, I decided to read the play again and found myself laughing hard at the silliness of it all. And suddenly, I remembered—The Foreigner is supposed to be funny! It is silly, and chaotic, and utterly absurd, and by the end of every production I’ve ever seen my sides have ached from laughing. For thirty-five years now, audiences of The Foreigner around the world have been united in one thing—raucous, almost hysterical laughter.

The play’s ability to elicit this kind of laughter has not been lost on critics, many of whom have dismissed the play as “preposterous even for a farce.” In an April 1985 review in People Weekly, the
writer noted, “If you want the final word on The Foreigner . . . listen to the audience packed into New York’s Astor Place Theatre. From start to finish the crowd yelps like hyenas” (“Audiences Have Taken a Shine to Playwright Larry Shue,” [People Weekly, April 8, 1985], 123).

What first struck me about the play was Shue’s ability to take very serious, very ugly topics—the Ku Klux Klan, hate, xenophobia, infidelity, anxiety, debilitating shyness, extra-marital pregnancy, mental deficiency—and turn them into things we could laugh at without trivializing them. Shue seemed keenly aware of the difficulties of life that touch all of us, and he wasn’t afraid to face them, or laugh at them; The Foreigner invites us to laugh along with him. The Foreigner reminds me that sometimes the best response to difficulty is a blast of gibberish and a hearty belly laugh, as demonstrated at the play’s end:

**BETTY:** (shakes her head) Well—real life's awful hard sometimes.

**FROGGY:** It is, Bet. It is that. (Toasting.) Blasny, blasny.

**BETTY:** Blasny, blasny. (They drink as the lights fade out.)

The power to invoke “very intense laughter” from difficult situations comes from the use of the one-liner, according to Terry R. Nienhuis, Ph.D., an English professor at Western Carolina University specializing in modern and contemporary drama. In an essay on Shue’s comedic skills, Nienhuis defines the one-liner as “a piece of dialogue that surprises the audience with an unexpected twist.” He points to the opening scene, as Charlie is telling Froggy about his wife’s infidelity: “Froggy attempts to minimize the seriousness of Charlie’s wife ‘makin’ eyes at some bloke,’” Nienhuis writes. “Froggy asks ‘where was it?’ and Charlie answers, ‘the shower’ . . . The audience is led to expect that the worst-case scenario is probably a casual flirtation. However, with the image of rampant sexuality that follows, the audience has their expectations violently overturned and the result is raucous laughter” (Drama for Students, Gale, 2000; reprinted at www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/foreigner#H).

Shue deftly uses one-liners to make difficult situations appear absurd, but it only works because Shue respects his characters as people, even the nasty ones. “Shue’s comedy is not sustained merely by expert one-liners,” Nienhuis writes. “Underneath nearly all the huge laughs is a genuine interest in what it means to be human.”

To illustrate his point, Nienhuis refers to The Foreigner’s breakfast scene “where Ellard has been directed by Betty to take no notice of Charlie.” The scene is infamously hilarious, but it is also an amazing display of humanity, from Ellard’s need for validation and respect to Charlie’s need for human connection, despite his shyness.

Writes Nienhuis: “Ellard’s spirit has been beaten down by years of low expectations, but he still cannot resist investigating this curious phenomenon in front of him. And Charlie, who has been similarly underestimated his whole life, has come to breakfast hoping to be left alone yet initiates the contact with Ellard. . . . Does Charlie react to Ellard out of genuine desire to create human contact? Or does he engage Ellard out of puckish love of play? Whatever Charlie’s motive, he belies in this gesture the self-denigrating appraisal that he is ‘boring,’ just as Ellard will belie to some extent the charge that he is ‘stupid.”

Later in the play, Charlie responds to the threat of Owen with similar aplomb, using Owen’s fear of “foreigners” and the gibberish he has perfected as “language” to defeat that threat. “The audience laughs uproariously, in part because the comic villain has gotten his comeuppance, in part because the human potential for personal growth has been reaffirmed,” Nienhuis writes. “Shue should not be confused with Shakespeare or Chekhov, but there is in . . . The Foreigner a dramatic texture that the belly laughs can often obscure.”

The Foreigner reminds us that we need to laugh, and that sometimes laughter is all we have in the face of serious, human difficulty. When Larry Shue died, among the many tributes to him was
the following gem from Amlin Gray, an actor, playwright, and close friend of Shue's who offered this comment on Shue's enduring legacy: “[Larry] used conventional structures as springboards, and he used them very skillfully. But sometimes all the underpinnings would just drop away and there would be a passage like . . . the breakfast scene in The Foreigner that lifted off into a sublime celebration of how silly and how lovely it is to be human. Now that Larry’s gone, nobody else will write these scenes, because nobody else knows how” (“A Tribute” in A Book of Tributes, [Glen Ellyn Public Library, Glen Ellyn, Indiana, n.d.], 43).

Optimism Stashed in Our Pockets and in Our Hearts
By Stephanie Chidester
From Insights, 2005

Anyone reading the reviews for the off-Broadway premiere of Larry Shue’s The Foreigner might reasonably have expected it to flop. John Simon, in typical nasty fashion, condemned the play as “mostly . . . unintelligent trash” (“If the Shue Doesn’t Fit,” New York, 12 Nov. 1984: 135). Frank Rich, in similar vein, called it “preposterous” and “hardly worth the effort” (“Stage: Anthony Heald in ‘Foreigner,’” The New York Times, 2 Nov., 1984: C3). While such criticisms initially had a dampening effect on ticket sales, audiences had the final say: the production enjoyed a run of 686 performances over two years, and eventually won two Obie (off-Broadway) awards (Richard E. Kramer, “The Power of the Reviewer: Myth or Fact?” Theatre History Studies 18 [1998]: 29).

So why has The Foreigner been so successful despite savage reviews and implausible plot elements? Clive Barnes attributed this “triumph” over the critics to “good old-fashioned word of mouth” (quoted in Kramer, 29). Shue credited the play’s success to its beneficent effect on the playgoers: “You have tired neurotic people filing in and you have kids coming out giggling and flirting” (WLA Literary Awards Committee, “Larry Shue, 1946-1985,” 1991 Notable Wisconsin Authors 18 Dec. 2004 Wisconsin Library Association, Inc. 28 Dec. 2004, http://www.wla.lib.wi.us/lac/notable/1991notable.htm). But this effect is due not merely to funny one-liners; Amlin Gray—a friend and colleague of Larry Shue at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater—explains, “In Larry’s plays, you felt his sweetness of nature, the speed of his intelligence, the breadth of his tolerance and his love of people. Even when there is a satirical edge to his work, there is no cruelty” (quoted in Damien Jaques, “Lasting Laughs,” Milwaukee Journal Sentinel 16 Nov. 2003: E1).

While The Foreigner is undeniably funny, it is not without substance. Shue tackles serious issues in this farce, bigotry chief among them. Reaction to Charlie, the “foreigner” in the play, varies from character to character. Betty Meeks, whose dreams of travel to distant lands have almost died, greets Charlie with enthusiasm: a representative of those distant lands has dropped into her lodge like manna from heaven. Catherine, though initially suspicious, eventually adopts him as friend and confidant. Ellard thinks Charlie odd, but decides to make the newcomer his protégé. However, Betty and Catherine are so tolerant that they accept and even encourage outrageous behavior. When Betty finds Charlie participating in a game of “monkey see, monkey do” with Ellard, she assumes this is a custom in Charlie’s country, and chastises Ellard for ridiculing him. Tolerance also leads them into gullibility—neither Betty nor Catherine questions Charlie’s rapid acquisition of the English language under
Ellard’s tutelage.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are Owen, David, and their confederates in the Ku Klux Klan, which David prefers to call “a good Christian hunt club” (Larry Shue, *The Foreigner*, Nelson Doubleday, Inc.: Garden City, NY, 1985: 44). Owen, from whom hatred emanates like a stench, smiles while launching a verbal attack against Charlie, who supposedly doesn’t understand English. Although the Reverend David Marshall Lee’s antipathy is better concealed, his bigotry is just as intense. When Catherine or Betty is around, he assumes the appearance of Christian love for his fellowman, but this mask gradually slips and is ultimately discarded when David reveals his intent to “[wipe] this nation clean of . . . people like [Charlie]” (136).

Shue sets up the characters of Charlie and David as polar opposites. Although there is a superficial similarity, with each hiding behind a false persona, their motives and actions are worlds apart. Whereas Charlie’s deception arises due to painful shyness, David’s originates in ambition and hatred. Whereas Charlie is inherently kind, David is criminally selfish.

The reverend has no concern for the lives he destroys in his quest to preside over the Georgia chapter of the “Invisible Empire” (74). He callously undermines Ellard’s relationship with his sister and tries to bulldoze Catherine into marriage; he conspires to defraud Betty of her property and Catherine and Ellard of their inheritance. Charlie, on the other hand, assumes his disguise reluctantly, then puts it to good use by frustrating David’s plans and repairing damage wherever he is able. He brightens Betty’s humdrum existence, and helps her forget her troubles. As Betty puts it, “with Charlie around, ye jest sorta forget about the bad things, don’t ye?” (80). With Charlie’s help, Ellard is transformed in Catherine’s eyes from half-wit to talented ESL instructor and proficient handyman (102). And having observed David’s sabotage of Ellard, Charlie applies those same techniques to Owen and humiliates the Klansman until hatred for *The Foreigner* overbalances allegiance to David’s plans.

In rescuing the others, Charlie also helps himself. When Charlie makes his entrance in the first act, Shue describes him as “quietly, somehow permanently, lost” (4). Charlie accepts as inescapable truth his wife’s assessment of him: “shatteringly, profoundly-boring” (7). He wants badly to “acquire personality” but doesn’t think it’s possible, and wishes he were “able to tell a funny story. To arouse laughter. Anger. Respect. To be thought-wise” (7). Conversation with others, even in his native language, is painful and nearly impossible. Charlie doesn’t need to travel to another country to feel like a foreigner—he feels out of place wherever he goes, sees himself as the one grey spot in an otherwise brightly colored world.

In pretending to be Cha-Oo-Lee, the interesting foreigner, Charlie does not so much re-invent himself as allow his inner butterfly to escape the staid, gray cocoon in which he has hidden for so long. In his efforts to extricate his new friends from their problems, he finds he has become “a raconteur,” “confessor,” and “prize pupil.” He arouses laughter and anger beyond his wildest expectations, and gains the respect of his friends.

Playwright Larry Shue “admitted that parts of him could be found in his prototype characters. . . . He referred to [his] ‘dream that the wishy-washy nice guy will emerge triumphant’” (Jaques), a dream which is certainly fulfilled in *The Foreigner*. Charlie tries to explain to Froggy his sense of awakening: “We-all of us, we’re becoming—we’re making one another complete, and alive” (95). Such optimism and hope are difficult to confine within the walls of a theatre, and audience members tend to leave with some stashed in their pockets and their hearts, which is perhaps the real reason *The Foreigner* triumphs over cynics and theatre critics alike.