Introduction

“Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.”—Augusto Boal

Independent, intercultural, entertaining, and uncensored, Mosaic Theater Company of DC invites students into the realm of socially-relevant and transformational theatre with the hopes of inspiring, challenging, and empowering the next generation. Our education department strives to put the power of the future back into the hands of students by flipping the narrative on what it means to attend the theatre. We strive to show students that theatre can be collaborative and communicative so that they may engage in meaningful dialogue, thoughtful introspection, and critical observation of the world in which we all live.

Written by Hannah Grillot and Dr. April Sizemore-Barber
MOSAIC THEATER COMPANY of DC

PRESENTS

THEORY

By Norman Yeung | Directed by Victoria Murray Baatin

Set Daniel Ettinger
Lights Brittany Shemuga
Costumes Danielle Preston
Sound David Lamont Wilson
Projections Dylan Uremovich
Properties Willow Watson
Dramaturg April Sizemore-Barber

Stage Managers April E. Carter*
Laurel VanLandingham*
Assistant Director Ashara Crutchfield
Fight Choreographer Paul Gallagher

Table of Contents

Synopsis .................................................................................................................. 4
Characters ............................................................................................................ 5
About the Artists ............................................................................................... 6
Curriculum Connections................................................................................... 7
Activities Before the Play.................................................................................. 8
Discussion Themes ............................................................................................ 9
Dramaturgical Essays ....................................................................................... 9
Activities After the Play.................................................................................... 11
Vocabulary ......................................................................................................... 15

EDUCATIONAL SPONSORS

Mosaic Theater Company of DC wants to thank our incredible educational sponsors and supporters who help make our arts education programs possible.

Capitol Hill Community Foundation
DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities
Reva & David Logan Foundation
Lorraine S. Dreyfus Theatre Education Fund
Weissberg Foundation
Max & Victoria Dreyfus Foundation
Nora Roberts Foundation
Synopsis

Isabelle, a young tenure-track professor, tests the limits of free speech by encouraging her students to contribute to an unmoderated discussion group, even as her wife, Lee, advises caution. When an anonymous student posts offensive comments and videos, Isabelle must decide whether to intervene or to let the social experiment play out. Soon, the posts turn abusive and threatening, leading Isabelle and her unknown tormentor to engage in a high-stakes game of cat-and-mouse that not only have Isabelle questioning her beliefs, but fearing for her life.
Characters

MUSA GURNIS as
Isabelle
A young professor of film theory. Pushes progressive values. Obstinate liberal, especially about freedom of speech and thought.

ANDREA HARRIS SMITH as
Lee
Isabelle's wife. Compromises her values to succeed as a tenured professor and novelist.

JOSH ADAMS as
Richard
Student. Bright and inquisitive.

BENAIREN KANE as
Davinder
Student. Altruistic and manipulative.

CAMILO LINARES as
Jorge
Student. Critical and shit-disturbing.

TYASIA VELINES as
Safina
Student. Sensitive and woke.

TONY K. NAM as
Owen
Head of Film Department. Acknowledges the power students have in today's university culture.
About the Artists

Norman Yeung (Playwright) is thrilled to have Mosaic produce the American Premiere of Theory. This play had its world premiere at Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, won the Herman Voaden National Playwriting Prize, and is being developed as a feature film. Theory will be published by Playwrights Canada Press. He was recently at the Stratford Festival developing his new play Others, a social satire about the shifting power from straight white males to... others. His play Pu-Erh received four Dora Award nominations, including Outstanding New Play, and was a Herman Voaden finalist. Theory and Ms. Desjardins are available as podcasts (PlayME/CBC). Acting credits include Chimerica (Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, Canadian Stage), The Kite Runner (Theatre Calgary, Citadel Theatre), Resident Evil: Afterlife (Sony/Screen Gems), Todd and the Book of Pure Evil (SPACE/CTV), and more. He holds a BFA in Acting/Theatre (University of British Columbia) and a BFA in Film (Ryerson University). Norman is from East Vancouver and lives in Los Angeles and Toronto. www.normanyeung.com

Victoria Murray Baatin (Director) is Mosaic’s Associate Artistic Director. She is a capable and dedicated thought leader committed to excellence. Victoria has had the privilege of serving on the Creative Forces: NEA Military Healing Arts Network—a partnership of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs dedicated to meeting the special needs of military patients and veterans with traumatic brain injury through creative arts therapy. Victoria has served at the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities as the Deputy Director for Policy and Strategic Action and the Legislative and Community Affairs Director. In these capacities she worked to develop the Commission’s policy agenda and created opportunities for the Commission to advance their priorities. Victoria has also worked with Americans for the Arts Action Fund where she managed the growth of the Arts Action Fund Political Action Committee (PAC) and served as liaison to federal candidates and campaigns. She also spearheaded the ArtsVote2012 campaign—a national initiative geared towards ensuring that the arts impact federal elections. Holding a Master’s in Art and Public Policy from NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts and a BFA in Theatre Arts from Howard University, Victoria is an artist in her own right and has directed numerous productions throughout the Washington, DC metropolitan area and is a member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. Victoria has trained both nationally and internationally, New York City (Lincoln Center Theatre Director’s Lab, Women’s Project Producer’s Lab); Ashland, Oregon (Oregon Shakespeare Festival FAIR Fellow); Washington, DC (Allen Lee Hughes Fellow, Arena Stage); Italy (LaMaMa, ETC. International Symposium for Directors); Brazil (Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed); and London (British Academy of Dramatic Arts Shakespeare Program).
Curriculum Connections

DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS Taken from the DCPS Scope and Sequence Matrix for the 2018-2019 School Year

Grade Level 9 (UNIT 1): Honorable Actions and Honorable Words
Students begin the year by thinking about what makes stories interesting, effective, and memorable. They will also begin exploring the high school theme, I am a Leader, by considering the role of honor, or “high esteem; respect”, in making a character admirable within a narrative.

Grade Level 9 (UNIT 2): Tension in Literature
In this unit, students will examine the ways in which mystery, tension, and surprise engage and intrigue readers, identify and describe ways authors 'hook and hold' readers through specific literary choices, and analyze the role of stories-within-the story to create tension and advance the plot.

Grade Level 10 (UNIT 1): The Life I Choose
Students begin the year by thinking about stories that authors have found worth telling, both through memoirs and in poetry. They will also continue their engagement with the high school theme, I am a Leader, by considering the roles of resilience and decision-making in leadership. Specifically, through close reading and study, students will consider the ways in which authors create and structure various forms of narrative writing. Students will craft their own narrative poems that both utilize the genre’s stylistic techniques and encompass the theme of “The Life I Choose.” They will also engage with multiple informational texts that help build context about the anchor texts. They will read paired excerpts from the anchor texts, The Other Wes Moore by Wes Moore and The Distance Between Us by Reyna Grande, indentifying text structure and stylistic elements used by the authors to create their own memoirs.

Grade Level 12 (UNIT 1): (Wo)Man
Students investigate the topic of gender and identity by reading, discussing, and writing in response to various texts, including short stories, poems, novels, articles, and images.
Activities Before the Play

**EDUCATORS:** To best prepare your students for your trip to Mosaic Theater Company of DC, consider these Pre Show Activities that you can do together in class.

**IN DISCUSSION: BEFORE THE SHOW**

Imagine that one of your teachers started an anonymous online platform for your class to discuss what you're learning. This chat board is completely anonymous and it would be difficult for anyone to find out which comments are yours. Normally, you would know that there are consequences for your actions and words. Does the freedom of this unmoderated chat board change the consequences as all? In what ways?

Around the nation we can see the rise of hate speech exhibited on the internet. In some cases the consequences for this hate is physical violence towards an oppressed group. Do you think that people are incited to violence because of the internet or would they be violent regardless? Do you think corporations (Google, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, 4Chan) and the government should be held accountable to moderating the hate on these websites? Should they be taken down or does that violate our first amendment right to free speech?

**MUSIC LISTENING:** Take a listen to our generated Spotify playlist to help set the tone and the mood for the play: [https://spoti.fi/2Zd98Iq](https://spoti.fi/2Zd98Iq)
Dramaturgical Essays

Class is in Session: Theory 101
By April Sizemore-Barber, Production Dramaturg

Minus a few detours into virtual and domestic space, most of Theory's action occurs beneath the fluorescent lights of a college lecture hall. For those of us who teach, this bland background hides an electric and unpredictable laboratory: part creative crucible, part political powder keg. As one of the few spaces where people from vastly different backgrounds enter into discussion, the classroom—at least, in theory—contains unlimited democratic potential. Yet Theory demonstrates that in our polarized moment, questions of identity, power, and representation are rarely theoretical. Far from being a domain of objective knowledge and dispassionate inquiry, college classrooms have become the frontline for a new culture war.

Isabelle, our protagonist, quickly discovers that good intentions can, in practice, lead to unsettling consequences. She cannot control her students’ interpretation of the films or their perception of her teaching. Tech-savvy digital natives, they easily transform the material, remix, or “meme” it to make it their own. Cultural critic Roland Barthes writes that a cultural text such as a film or play can only gain meaning through its interpretation, emerging anew from the death of authorial intent. Such metaphorical death is arguably an intrinsic and, indeed, positive part of the educational process: as in, having fulfilled their role, the teacher must “die” for the lesson to live on in the next generation. Yet in our current moment, this turn of phrase carries an additional, sinister implication. “Open Carry” laws allow guns on campuses in certain states; professors' personal information is increasingly shared online by both disgruntled students and partisan trolls, a process known as “doxing.”

While the classroom in Theory may be meant as a "safe space to take risks," Isabelle—and many of us—face a steep learning curve in assessing the risks and realities of this Brave New World.

Discussion Themes

- Freedom of Speech
- The influence of social media
- Safe spaces
- Banning of films
- Propaganda
- Public vs Private discourse
- Intersectional privilege
Theory Cheat Sheet: Snapshots of Birth of a Nation and Baise-Moi

By April Sizemore-Barber, Production Dramaturg

Playwright Norman Yeung crucially chooses to tell this story through the lens of a semester-long film course. As audiences auditing the class, we are encouraged to draw parallels between current online arguments about censorship, trigger warnings, and #CancelCulture and similar debates throughout cinema history. Since the earliest nickelodeon "photoplays," filmgoers have disagreed about whether film should be judged on artistic merit or on the politics/intent of its creator. The following films are central touchstones to Theory's action, generating heated class discussion and providing thematic commentary on the proceedings.

Birth of a Nation (1915, D.W. Griffith): Innovative in Form, Racist in Content

Considered an unparalleled masterpiece for much of the 20th Century, Griffith's three-hour silent film tells the intertwining stories of two white families on either side of the Mason Dixon line. Spanning both Civil War and Reconstruction eras, the film doubles as a romanticized origin story for the Ku Klux Klan. The film invented many of cinematic innovations still widely used today, including: parallel editing (cutting between two scenes to comment on the action); the use of flashbacks; facial close ups, capturing intense emotion; and panoramic longshots capturing the epic costs of war. Yet Birth of a Nation is also notorious for profoundly offensive racial stereotypes. Its white heroes, described as an "Aryan Brotherhood," gain complexity when contrasted against one-dimensional non-white characters, such as slaves enjoying their enslavement, scheming, mixed-race "mulattos" seeking power at all costs, and bestial, oversexed black men lustng after white women. Mobilizing the emotional appeal of melodrama—aied by the popularity of Lillian Gish, the Meryl Streep of her day—the final scenes rousingly depict the protagonists in full Klan regalia (see image), riding in to save the day for white supremacy. The response of white audiences, who had literally never seen anything like it, reportedly bordered on orgiastic. Black audiences were horrified and scared, with the NAACP documenting a marked increase in acts of violence wherever the film was screened and lobbying, unsuccessfully, for its banning. Thus, the birth of modern cinema is intrinsically intertwined with KKK's resurrection for Jim Crow Era. Birth of a Nation served as an effective Klan recruitment tool well into the 1970s.

Baise-Moi (2000, Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trihn Thi): Feminism Brought to You by PornHub

French film Baise-Moi is a gritty tale of two working class women who, bored with their lives and sick of abusive men, embark on a hyper-violent crime spree. Directed and starring women with experience in the sex industry, the film notoriously featured unsimulated sex scenes and graphic depictions of violence (often in concert with sex). Banned upon its release, Baise-Moi initiated intense debate about the nature of pornography and feminism. The work is difficult to classify in either direction. Unlike feminism's rejection of the objectifying "male gaze," Baise-Moi appropriated and reveled in the same visual vocabulary as mainstream pornography (ironically, the film is only available online through a pirated copy on the website PornHub). Yet Despentes has suggested that the widespread critical obsession with the sex scenes masked a deeper discomfort with the radical feminist content, commenting, "A lot of people really don't want to see two North African women who have been raped taking up arms and shooting European men. That's a little too close to historical reality.'
Activities After the Play

SCENE STUDY 1

GRADE 9 – Honorable Actions and Honorable Words

What can you tell about the character of these two women from this scene? How are their actions honorable? How do they hold on to their integrity? How do their perspectives differ in their interpretations of moral character?

GRADE 10 – The Life I Choose

Think about the choices that these two characters have made in their lives and their careers. Imagine what choices they will have to continue to make. Don’t forget to think about the parameters of gender, age, sexual orientation, class, and race and how and when these are distinct and when they intersect. How does Lee’s experience differ from Isabelle’s and vice versa? How does this shape their perspective? How does this affect their actions? How does it affect their relationship?

GRADE 12 – (Wo)Man

Reread this scene thinking about how gender roles are reinforced or loosened in the dialogue of the two women. How are they perpetuating gender roles in academia? Why do you think this is necessary?

LEE: You know what your problem is? You’re hardly ten years older than them. Lived with your mom until three years ago, straight into PhD, been a student your whole life. Why would they trust you?
ISABELLE: I’m like a smart big sister or a—
LEE: Friend?
ISABELLE: Yeah.
LEE: Make them call you Doctor.
ISABELLE: You’d give me a stellar teacher evaluation and hire me again next year, wouldn’t you?
LEE: Of course. A baby doesn’t fund itself.
ISABELLE: (sighs) God.
LEE: Cold feet? We said five years. Plenty of time to get tenure, then we can focus on the kid. Hell, you’re so brilliant you could do it in four years if you play the game. Three. No rush.
ISABELLE: Ugh.
LEE: I would if I could.
ISABELLE: What if I gave birth to an asshole? I’ve already given birth to a monster.
LEE: (droll) Choose your sperms wisely.
ISABELLE: Have you seen how cruel kids are? What makes me think I can protect our child when I can’t even stop adults from saying the N-word on my website?
LEE: Can’t or won’t?
ISABELLE: You see! I wanna raise her-him-them the way I believe is right—
LEE: You know you’re not this kid’s only parent, yeah?
ISABELLE: ...But what if I’m wrong?
LEE: You are.
ISABELLE: You think I’m wrong?
LEE: There’s hope for you.
ISABELLE: I’m not gonna fail.

*Isabelle goes to the computer.*
LEE: How we raise our baby will be the biggest statement you’ll make.
ISABELLE: ...Checking e-mail...
LEE: None of this pink vs. blue bullshit, Barbie vs. Hot Wheels bullshit, we’ll help them grow into whomever they want, let them make choices for themselves—
ISABELLE: You mean, give them freedom to express themselves however they want?
LEE: You will not fail.
ISABELLE: Once I learn how I’m wrong. E-mail.
LEE: I’m still figuring shit out too, Izzy. I don’t have all the answers— No, I do but—

**SCENE STUDY 2**

**GRADE 9 – Honorable Actions and Honorable Words**

Think about the intentions of both Isabelle and Owen in this dialogue. What does Owen want? What does Isabelle want? What are the things that they are saying in order to achieve those objectives? Do you think that their words make them seem honorable?

**GRADE 10 – The Life I Choose**

Think about the relationship between Owen and Isabelle as boss and employee. How does this relationship show itself through this dialogue? How does Owen express leadership over this situation? Is this effective?

**GRADE 12 – (Wo)Man**

Think about the relationship between Owen and Isabelle as boss and employee. What are the power dynamics in this section? How does this manifest itself in the dialogue between Owen and Isabelle? How does gender play into these dynamics?

*He holds up the knife.*

OWEN: You’re not intimidated by this? You seem it.
ISABELLE: Tell me how.
OWEN: ...I’m. Here. We’re talking about it.
ISABELLE: My feelings aren’t why I called you here. Let’s talk about what this is rather than what I seem.
OWEN: Maybe it’s some kid’s in your neighbourhood.
ISABELLE: Have you dealt with a formal grievance before?
OWEN: Grievance over who?
ISABELLE: Richard69—
OWEN: ...Who you only know as a bunch of megabytes...
ISABELLE: I could use your help with that.
OWEN: ...Who stopped posting after you made him persona non grata.
ISABELLE: Is he your nephew or something?
OWEN: Isabelle. I’d advise you to let Richard69 back on your discussion board.
She laughs.
A knock at the door.

ISABELLE: Who is it?

Silence.

ISABELLE: WHO IS IT?

SAFINA: Safina from Theory.

ISABELLE: Come in.

She enters. She accidentally slams the door shut.

ISABELLE: Could you please open the door? School policy.

She opens the door.

SCENE STUDY 3: AFTER THE PLAY

Read the dialogue with a partner. In this scene, Isabelle is talking with one of her college students during her office hours. Read the passage while thinking about these questions. What does the other character want? What does the character want from the other? After reading the scene, discuss your answers with your partner.

Owen: I won’t allow his education to suffer due to your renegade social media.

Isabelle: I won’t allow him to continue posting lynchings—

Owen: Birth of a Nation.

Isabelle: ...Nazis...

Owen: Triumph of the Will.

Isabelle: ...Hate images, violating students with—

Owen: And you’re not?

Isabelle: I’m not sending porn, explicit fucking—

Owen: What?

Isabelle: FUCKING.

Owen: You showed your class Baise-moi. Your syllabus said clips.

Isabelle: I. The film has no meaning in fragments...

Owen: They have a right to not watch a film—

Isabelle: ...they need to understand the whole context...

Owen: ...starring porn actresses having real sex!

Isabelle: ...a fair debate about feminist cinema...

Owen: You keep pushing your liberal agenda so hard, someone will push back!

Isabelle: My liberal agenda?

Owen: COULDN’T YOU HAVE SHOWN THEM THELMA & LOUISE.

Pause.

Owen: You’re one hell of a prof. After our interview I wanted to cancel the day, give you the position on the spot: bang. I fought for you. Why? Ideas. Your ideas were exciting, Isabelle. I knew the students would be inspired by you and— You’re just like them, but with a PhD. You’re the same generation. But... You’re from an older school (taps his temple). It no longer fits here. Your belief that anything goes and everything’s valid, they would give that up in order to feel safe. And that’s valid. Not everything has equal value, some things are just... dangerous. So when you show that film and... and you made a chat board? from where?... and your paper stunt, and... "Negro"... now you want someone expelled.
ISABELLE: Is anyone else out there? Jorge, not Jorge...?
SAFINA: Seeing him soon. Want me to tell him anything?
ISABELLE: No, I'll take care of it. What's up?
SAFINA: I'd like to talk about my paper.

Safina sits in a chair by the door. She puts her binder down.

SAFINA: I'm writing about Baise-moi. You told us all these layers of oppression – class, gender, race – so the film's totally not just about women overpowering men. Since one of the characters is Arab, I wanna look at minorities overthrowing authority. We didn't talk too much about it in class: Arab versus the French.

ISABELLE: The focus was feminist cinema.

SAFINA: But I see parallels between Baise-moi and Third Cinema.

ISABELLE: Excellent!

SAFINA: I'm making a post-colonial argument, about fighting back against Western hegemony.

ISABELLE: ...You're into hegemony.

SAFINA: Not into-into. It offends me. Everything I've read centres around the feminism—

ISABELLE: Offends you enough to do something about it.

SAFINA: I already am.

Isabelle takes out the knife and places it on her desk, close at hand.

ISABELLE: Do you recognise this knife?

SAFINA: Looks like the one in that video. It's so wrong!

ISABELLE: Show me your hands.

SAFINA: You can't do that.

ISABELLE: Your hands.

SAFINA: It's my body.

Safina slides her hands into her pockets. Impasse.

SAFINA: Why would I make it?

ISABELLE: Then who?

SAFINA: Says so right on the board.

ISABELLE: I don't read the board any more.

SAFINA: Then how'd you see the video?

ISABELLE: You tell me.

SAFINA: I'd rather talk about research.

ISABELLE: E-mailed me.

SAFINA: Creepster. You gonna delete it from the board?

ISABELLE: It's not for me to use.

SAFINA: Either you get back on and delete or I'll— I went to the Dean's office.

ISABELLE: Dean's office.

SAFINA: This class is so... I can't say a single word on the board without getting harassed.

ISABELLE: What if I got your classmate to moderate?

SAFINA: Whoah. You would?

ISABELLE: Would that make you feel less... complaint-like?

SAFINA: That's not all I feel. I can't tell my mom or dad it's the internet giving me panic attacks again.
Hegelian Dialectics: also known as the dialectical method, is at base a discourse between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject but wishing to establish the truth through reasoned arguments. As pioneered by philosopher Georg Hegel, the word dialectic has references a contradiction between ideas that serves as the determining factor in their relationship. Dialectic comprises three stages of development: first, a thesis or statement of an idea, which gives rise to a second step, a reaction or antithesis that contradicts or negates the thesis, and third, the synthesis, a statement through which the differences between the two points are resolved.

Sofia Coppola: an American screenwriter, director, producer, and former actress. Coppola made her feature-length debut with the coming-of-age drama The Virgin Suicides (1999), based on the novel of the same name by Jeffery Eugenides. In 2004, Coppola received the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for the comedy-drama Lost in Translation and became the third woman to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director.

Eisenstein: Considered a pioneer of montage in Soviet cinema and argued that montage was the essence of film itself.

Hegemony: The dominance of one over another. Could be dominance in ideas, norms, government structures, military, or people.

Montage: Certain Russian film-makers' radical theory of editing, which sticks images together not for coherence, but for some other intellectual reason.

Third Cinema: Political and cinematic movement from Third World countries which acts as an alternative to Hollywood (First Cinema) and European Films (Second Cinema). Third Cinema hopes to portray socially realistic depictions of life and often focus on poverty, revolution, tyranny, class, colonialism, and the like.

Ava DuVernay: an American filmmaker and film distributor. For her work on Selma (2014), DuVernay became the first black woman to be nominated for a Golden Globe Award for Best Director, and also the first black female director to have her film nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture. In 2017, she was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature for her film 13th. In 2019 she created, co-wrote, and directed the Netflix drama miniseries When They See Us, based on the 1989 Central Park jogger case.

Propaganda: Films that attempt to persuade their audience to believe a viewpoint, often a political one. Whether such films are considered to be morale-boosting patriotism or devious propaganda is a question of which side you’re on.