

Arts Club Theatre Company

**TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE**

*The Shoplifters*

2018/2019 Season

# THE SHOPLIFTERS



Granville Island Stage

**FEBRUARY 7 – MARCH 9, 2019**

THE  
**Great-West Life**  
ASSURANCE COMPANY



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# Contents

Welcome .....	1
About the Arts Club Theatre Company .....	1
Learning objectives.....	2
Connections to New BC Curriculum .....	2
Plot Summary .....	3
Meet the Playwright: Morris Panych .....	3
Characters.....	3
Discussion Questions .....	4
Activity One: Theatre of the Absurd .....	5
Activity Two: Security Guard or Shoplifter?.....	6
Sources .....	9

## Welcome

This guide was created for teachers and students. It contains an overview of the play’s story, as well as informative resources and activities for teachers and students. The guide aims to provide background knowledge and critical perspectives on the play that will yield fruitful discussion and foster an understanding and appreciation of the theatre arts.

If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions for the guide, please contact our group sales representative at 604.687.5315 ext. 253 or [groups@artsclub.com](mailto:groups@artsclub.com).

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## About the Arts Club Theatre Company

The Arts Club of Vancouver was founded in 1958 as a private club for artists, musicians, and actors. It became the Arts Club Theatre in 1964 when the company opened its first stage in a converted gospel hall at Seymour and Davie Streets.

Now in its 55<sup>th</sup> season of producing professional live theatre in Vancouver, the Arts Club Theatre Company is a non-profit charitable organization that operates three theatres: the Granville Island Stage, the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, and the Goldcorp Stage at the BMO Theatre Centre. Its popular productions range from musicals and contemporary comedies to new works and classics.

Learn more about the Arts Club Theatre Company at <http://artsclub.com/>

## Learning objectives

After viewing a production of *The Shoplifters* and completing the following activities, students will be able to:

- Explore the dramatic convention of Absurdism to better understand the style of *The Shoplifters*
- Use creative and critical thinking to analyze the moral ambiguity of shoplifting that is explored in the production
- Make connections between the philosophical and thematic content of the play and their own lives and personal experiences

## Connections to New BC Curriculum

### Arts Education – Drama (12)

#### *Big Ideas*

- Drama offers a dynamic way of expressing one's identity and sense of belonging
- Drama communicates ideas, influences opinions, and inspires change
- Growth as an artist is dependent on active engagement, risk taking, perseverance, resilience, and reflection

#### *Curricular Competencies*

- Use drama to communicate, respond to, and understand environmental and social issues
- Develop and demonstrate an increasingly sophisticated repertoire of theatre vocabulary, conventions, styles, and genres through presentation and performance
- Engage in appropriate risk taking to express thoughts and emotions
- Apply critical, creative, and reflective thinking skills in the exploration, design, creation, and refinement of performances
- Expand connections through drama and theatre among individuals in the learning community on a local, regional, and global scale

### English Language Arts: Composition (11)

#### *Big Ideas*

- Questioning what we hear, read, and view contributes to our ability to be educated and engaged citizens
- Language shapes ideas and influences others
- The exploration of text and story deepens our understanding of diverse, complex ideas about identity and others

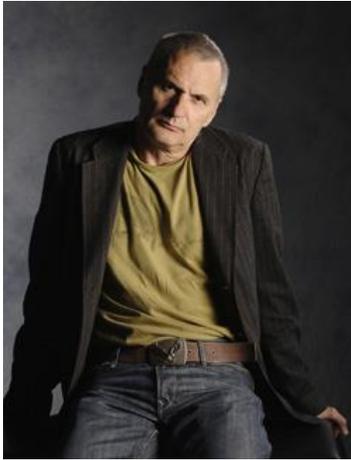
#### *Curricular Competencies*

- Apply appropriate strategies in a variety of contexts to comprehend written, oral, visual, and multimodal texts in order to guide inquiry and to extend thinking
- Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to explore ideas within, between, and beyond texts
- Recognize and understand how language constructs personal, social, and cultural identities
- Respectfully exchange ideas and viewpoints from diverse perspectives to build shared understandings and extend thinking

## Plot Summary

Alma is an experienced shoplifter who has enlisted her nervous friend, Phyllis, to steal some steaks. Unfortunately for them, it is Dom's, an intense and devout security guard who sees the world in black and white, first day on the job. Otto, the head security guard, thankfully, is a little more impressionable. This cast of quirky characters explore the grey areas of 'right' versus 'wrong' in this absurd and dark Canadian comedy by Morris Panych.

## Meet the Playwright: Morris Panych



Morris Panych is a Canadian actor, playwright, and director who has directed over ninety plays and written thirty plays of his own. He was born in Edmonton, Alberta but works primarily in Vancouver and Montreal. He received his BFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia and went on to study acting in London. His plays have been produced all over the world and are translated into many different languages. Throughout his career he has won a plethora of awards, including many Dora Mavor Moore awards and Jessie Richardson Theatre awards for acting/directing. His plays are mostly of the absurdist style, existentially reflecting on what it is to be alive and other philosophical dilemmas.

## Characters

**Alma:** An experienced shoplifter; very alert and tough.

**Phyllis:** Alma's accomplice. She is younger than Alma, and very nervous about the whole situation.

**Otto:** A long-time security guard. He is on his way out of the security industry.

**Dom:** A new security guard who is being mentored by Otto. He is young, eager, and obsessed with the law.

## Discussion Questions

*These questions can be used as writing prompts, as well as prompts for small-group and large-group discussions.*

### Pre-show discussion questions:

*The following questions have been included in order to spark discussions and to get students thinking about what they might experience prior to viewing the production.*

- Have you seen any live performances on stage before? What are your expectations about what you will see on stage in this production?
- What do you already know about the play, including the plot, production elements (such as lighting, sound, costumes, and sets) and the characters? How do you anticipate that these elements will come together in the play?
- What do you already know about 'Theatre of the Absurd'? Can you think of any examples of plays in this style?
- What is your personal opinion regarding stealing and shoplifting? Do you think there are any situations in which these actions could be justified?

### Post-show discussion questions:

*The following questions are ideal for engaging students in reflection and exploration of the major themes, characters, and other elements of the production.*

- What ideas or themes did the play make you think about?
- What did you notice about the ways in which the characters communicated with one another?
- What did you notice about the ways in which the characters displayed their emotions?
- What did you think about the technical elements of the production: which elements stood out to you the most, and why? What effects did this have on your understanding of the play?
- Imagine that you could meet with members of the cast, crew, artistic team, or production team. What questions would you ask them about the choices and elements in the production?
- How do you think the play explored the conventions of Absurdism?
- Do you think that the characters are being greedy, or are they trying to 'fight the system'? Based on the context of the play, what do they mean by 'the system'?
- After viewing *The Shoplifters*, has your view on stealing/shoplifting shifted at all? Why or why not?
- Do you think that theft can ever be completely eliminated? If yes, how? If no, why not?
- Do you think there is any difference morally between shoplifting from a large corporation and stealing from someone specifically?

## Activity One: Theatre of the Absurd

(Recommended for Drama or English classes)

**Rationale:** Like many of Panych's plays, *The Shoplifters* falls under the stylistic category of 'Theatre of the Absurd'. As this may be a foreign style to students, it is helpful to explore Absurdism at an introductory level in order to better understand the play. The existential quality of *The Shoplifters* can be a difficult and sophisticated concept to grasp and therefore, this exploration will give the students a launching pad that will allow them to analyze the play critically and creatively.

**Step One:** Define the word 'Absurd'. As a class, brainstorm what the word 'absurd' means. Discuss how it might be used in the context of theatre, writing, or performance.

**Step Two:** What is Absurdism/Theatre of the Absurd? Hand out or project the description below and discuss as a class whether or not anyone has seen an 'Absurdist' or 'Theatre of the Absurd' production before.

### Absurdism and Theatre of the Absurd:

Absurdism or Theatre of the Absurd interrogates the point of life. After World War II, Theatre of the Absurd was developed and inspired by the philosophical school of thought called 'Existentialism'. This 'ism' inquires and examines society's beliefs and values, ultimately resulting in an ongoing evaluation of the purpose of life. This goes hand in hand with Absurdism which trivializes human endeavour and human existence. Therefore, Theatre of the Absurd functions to inspire the audience to view the futility of their own personal actions and lives. In Absurdist plays, characters are typically of low status, trapped by their life situations and seemingly have no past or future. A common theme that exists in Theatre of Absurd is that any and all actions will inspire random and illogical results. At the beginning, Absurdism and Theatre of the Absurd was not exactly successful but has since gained traction as reflected by Morris Panych's collections of plays.

### **Step Three:** Absurdism Movement Warmup

Ask the students to spread out around the room; they will interpret the instructions and be working individually. Remind the students that this is an exploration and because it is in the Absurdist style, there is no wrong answer and the goal of this activity is for it to make little sense and lack meaning.

- 1) Move through the space in a calm manner and speed. Do not look at the actors around you.
- 2) Move through the space aimlessly. You have no goals. Life no longer has meaning. No matter what you do, your actions will not have consequences.
- 3) You are now stuck to the spot. You are supposed to be somewhere but you cannot move at all.
- 4) You are able to move again. Whenever you feel like it, stop and become rooted to the spot again. Challenge yourself to pause longer than what feels comfortable.
- 5) As you move around the space, start to take notice of the objects around the room.
- 6) Select a specific object and approach it. Tell it what you ate for breakfast.
- 7) Find another object and using gibberish, tell it what you ate for breakfast.
- 8) Approach a third object and listen to see if it has anything to say to you.

**Step Four:** Warmup Debrief

- How did this exercise make you feel? Did you feel absurd? What part of it made you feel the most absurd?
- What did your body feel like? Did certain parts of your body carry more/less tension than others?
- How did it feel to function without meaning? Did you feel lost or did you feel freed?

**Step Five:** Anti-Theatre Activity

Ask the students to find their own space in the room. They will be miming these actions without interacting or noticing other actors in the room. They are working individually.

PART A: ALL ACTORS WORKING INDIVIDUALLY, WITHOUT AUDIENCE

1. Mowing the lawn
2. Mowing the lawn; but with nail clippers
3. Washing the dishes
4. Washing the dishes; but with a q-tip
5. Painting the side of a house
6. Painting the side of a house; but with nail polish

PART B: HALF OF THE CLASS IS ONSTAGE, HALF IS AUDIENCE AND THEN SWITCH:

GROUP 1:

1. Take out the trash
2. Take out the trash; but you do not have a garbage bag

GROUP 2:

1. Using an umbrella in a storm
2. Using an umbrella in a storm; but now your umbrella is tiny

**Step Six:** Anti-Theatre Activity Debrief

- How did the tasks change as they became increasingly absurd?
- How did it feel to be onstage doing the absurd actions versus being in the audience and witnessing them? Was it different or a similar experience?
- Now that you explored Absurdism, do you feel like you have a better understanding of *The Shoplifters*?

## **Activity Two: Security Guard or Shoplifter?**

(Recommended for Drama or English classes)

**Rationale:** *The Shoplifters* explores the morale and societal grey area of stealing and therefore it is important for students to explore and analyze this theme before viewing the show. It is also beneficial, after analysis of the script, for students to be able personalize what they have encountered by

reflecting upon this theme with a writing prompt. This personalization allows them to view the production with a deeper connection to the content and internalize it further.

In an interview with Theatre Calgary from September 2015, Panych explains his moral ambivalence toward stealing: "Theft at its worst is greed, but at its best can symbolize an act of defiance against the system... We all have our own internal sense of justice that doesn't always match the legal one."

**Step One:** As a class or in small groups, read through one or both of the provided scenes from *The Shoplifters*.

### **OTTO AND ALMA SCENE FROM THE SHOPLIFTERS.**

OTTO: These are awfully nice steaks. How were you going to cook these? In a peppercorn sauce?

ALMA: What exactly is going on here, Otto?

OTTO: To be honest, they seem like the kind of steaks you might order in – I don't know – a very nice restaurant. If I was being strictly entrepreneurial about it I would probably be saying to myself 'if I'm so destitute, why would I eat this expensive steak, when I could eat something cheaper, and maybe, I don't know, sell this top quality rib eye to a local restaurant, take the money, and buy something I really needed'? Of course, that's a lot to say to myself, and I'm not a greedy shoplifter who doesn't know when to stop.

ALMA: Is that what I am?

OTTO: According to your friend, Phyllis.

ALMA: She said that, did she?

OTTO: She said you were going to eat these. Cook them, and eat them.

ALMA: That's a problem for you.

OTTO: In all my time here, I have never eaten a steak like this. You know why?

ALMA: Ethical issues?

OTTO: I can't afford it.

ALMA: Is that why you're keeping me here?

OTTO: Is it just greed, Alma? I'm trying to put things together, that's all.

ALMA: I'll be dead before you can do that.

OTTO: How do you mean?

ALMA: What's greed got to do with anything?

OTTO: I don't know; we were talking about how there might actually be a legitimate reason for stealing, that reason being survival.

ALMA: You think survival is all we deserve? Hanging on by our fingernails?

*(Source: 'The Shoplifters' by Morris Panych)*

### Alma's Monologue from The Shoplifters:

ALMA: You think she was going to stick around? There's a lot you need to learn about shoplifting. You want to be a security guard? Let me give you some free advice. First: if a person steals something, don't get all excited and go after them right away. They're probably going to outrun you because they have survival on their side; what have you got? Instead, observe them; ask yourself what it is they're taking. Make a careful inventory of what's going out of the store; try to understand the drift that's taking place, slowly, over the course of time; merchandise, unpaid, moving out the door. This is life. This is what's happening. Seasons change, the clouds roll by, merchandise comes in, merchandise goes out. Draw pictures of it; whatever; write poems about it. You think you can put a stop to it; don't try. It's a kind of equilibrium; the way celestial bodies hold each other in place. Instead, ask yourself: 'what can I really do?' It's not going to end; ever. And then, every once in a while, nab somebody, some poor loser, and call in the police – make sure it's right away because that's the law – and have them arrested. Not every time you catch somebody; too much work; just every once in a while. And then, when it comes time for their court appearance, don't show up.

*(Source: 'The Shoplifters' by Morris Panych)*

**Step Two:** Scene Analysis. Talk/analyze in small groups, in partners, or as a class, exploring these questions in reference to the above scene(s):

- Do you agree or disagree with the vantage points of the characters? Is there truth to what they are saying? Depending on the scene, who do you agree with and why?
- Are they being greedy or are they trying to 'fight the system'? Based on the context of the play, what is 'the system'?
- After reading these scenes, has your view on stealing/shoplifting shifted at all? If so, why? If not, why?

**Step Three:** Writing prompt. After reading, discussing, and analyzing the scene, each student will personally reflect on the two following questions in writing. They can do this individually or in small groups, whatever works best for the context of the classroom.

- PART A: In what situation(s) could you see yourself shoplifting and feel justified in doing so?
- PART B: Do you think there is any difference morally between shoplifting from a large corporation and stealing from someone specifically?

**Step Four:** Presentation/sharing of writing. If students are comfortable, they may share their writing responses aloud to the class, or in the context of small groups or partners. Allow time for the students to reflect on their peer's opinions and reflections.

**Step Five:** Post-writing group discussion. Guiding questions:

- Are you a shoplifter or a security guard?
- Has your opinion on stealing changed at all based on this activity? If so, how will this new perspective carry into your everyday life?

## Sources

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