

ESL Plays at the Educational Theater of New York: Follow-Up Activities

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Educational Theater of NY offers three plays for ESL learners: No Answer and Mr. Edward's Appointment, written and produced by Barbara Bregstein.

No Answer and Mr. Edward's Appointment are 20 minutes long and run the same night. No Answer is about a meeting of two strangers at a bus stop. A man and a woman are drawn to each other and then pulled apart as their conversation evolves from small talk to issues of love, faith, betrayal and loyalty. In Mr. Edward's Appointment, Ruth, a mysterious righteous person, meets Mr. Edward in a waiting room at a doctor's office. Their conversation about health transforms into a series of revelations about marriage and love, support, loneliness and the desire for communication. I will focus on No Answer and Mr. Edward's Appointment.

“Discover a Writer in Yourself”: Follow-up Activities with Level 2 Students:

1. Share Your Impressions. Pair work followed by group discussion. Some suggested questions:

a. Based on play #1 (No Answer): Why do you think Loretta is waiting for her husband at the bus stop and not at home? Why do you think Paul left Loretta? What can a woman do if she wants to bring back her husband? What might Bob's future be? What do you think will happen with Loretta in the future? Can each of them find happiness? How does each of them define happiness? What are the sources of joy in their lives today? Will they be happier if they change their lifestyle, ideals or values? Can mature or older people change significantly their views on life or behavior?

b. Based on both plays: How does it happen that characters shift from impersonal small talk to deep personal conversations? Has it ever happened to you that a complete stranger started an important personal conversation with you? Is the style

of communication in your country and in the U.S. similar or different? Where do people seem to be more open about their lives? Is it equally appropriate for a man or a woman to start a conversation with a stranger? Why do people sometimes prefer to pour out their heart problems to complete strangers? Can the advice of people who don't really know us be useful?

c. Based on play # 2 (Mr. Edward's Appointment): What is the meaning of the expression "a righteous person"? Why does the world need the righteous people? If nobody ever knows who the 36 righteous people are, why does Ruth tell Mr. Edward that she is righteous? Does she want to produce a great impression on him or does she want him to pay more attention to her advice? Have you ever met someone whom you can describe as righteous?

d. Based on both plays: Look at each character and describe the feelings of Bob, Loretta, Mr. Edward, and Ruth. Can you draw parallels or see contrast between the two plays? In which ways are the characters in the first play similar to (or different from) the characters in the second play? What did the writer want the audience to feel and think about?

2. Be a Critic! Group Assignment. Task: Write a review article for *The New York Times* "Arts and Leisure" section. More advanced students assume the role of literary critics. They must come up with a short critical article for a newspaper that defines the theme of one of the two plays, speaks about the quality of the actors' performance, and ranks the performance. Low proficiency students have a similar, but less challenging task. They write a letter to a newspaper describing their impressions about the play and either recommending it to the other readers or not.

- 3. Be a Playwright! Pair Assignment. Task:** Write a dialogue, learn, practice, and present it in class. I wanted my students to use the plays only as the starting point and invent the continuation of the story. I encouraged them to feel free to change the perspective of the play to comic, or absurd, or to remain true to what they felt the approach of the real playwright was, to be as sarcastic, serious, sentimental, pessimistic, witty, didactic, as they wanted to.

Possible Topics:

a. Imagine that one day, while Loretta is waiting at the bus stop for her husband Paul, who left her, he comes back. What will they speak about? Will she forgive him? How can he explain the reasons why he left her? He and Loretta will probably discuss how both of them need to change their habits and interests in order to be happy together again.

b. Loretta is waiting for her husband Paul when she meets Bob at the bus stop for the second time. Will their second conversation be as personal as the first one?

c. Mr. Edward comes home to his wife who suffers from depression due to a sleep disorder and constant nightmares. Will he try to tell her how much he cares about her? Will they speak about her health?

d. One day Ruth, the righteous person, meets _____ (you, your friend, Loretta, Bob, etc.). She will try to find out which things in life are important to the person she speaks to and how to help him/her.

- 4. Find the bridge between art and life! Individual essay assignment. Task:** Identify and discuss one of the prominent themes brought up in the plays, and give examples from real life that illustrate your interpretation of the theme. Most of the students wrote about issues of loneliness, betrayal and faithfulness, cultural differences in communication style, sincerity with strangers and self-sufficiency versus dependence on others.

Two essays based on the theater experience written by level 2 students at York:

Student Essay
Instructor: Elena Arakelian
November 11

Level 2a
Essay #4
Final Draft

Loneliness

Not every company is better than loneliness. For example, when we went to the theater, we saw a play about the experience of Loretta and Bob, and we learned that not everybody is a good company for someone who is alone.

Loneliness is a spiritual situation. It isn't an illness, so when people feel loneliness, they don't necessarily find the solution in another person or maybe in another activity. I think loneliness is very common in our society and sometimes it can last for a long time because it is a very difficult and sad situation, but it is very important whom people talk to about their problems. Sometimes I feel lonely because my parents went back to my country, but I try doing different things and I keep my mind busy. I don't wait for anyone. It isn't an easy situation.

However, there aren't any simple and universal solutions for this condition. Remember Loretta and Bob, she compared him with her husband all the time, then she came to the conclusion that they don't have many things in common, so the relationship finished very fast, before it really started.

For Loretta it is important to find in Bob or in somebody else some traits similar to her husband's, because she cannot forget her husband. When she started to talk about her experience of married life to Bob, a complete stranger, this signified that she couldn't forget her husband. Maybe everything happened very fast, so she didn't have time to get over it.

If Loretta meets someone who has the same traits as her husband, she won't be happy, because she wants to continue living with those memories, but she forgets about the most important thing. Even though she was happy in her relationship, her husband abandoned her, maybe because love ended and she didn't see it.

Finally, I think we can't hide our loneliness. We should express our emotions. We should try to understand ourselves. When we know ourselves, we can begin everything again.

The Stranger

Nothing is harder than loneliness. When you live alone you become sad, nervous, excited and boring.

Last Friday I met a woman at the train station and she said to me, “Good morning”. That was how our conversation with her started. I am going to tell you about this meeting. “Good morning, it’s the first sentence that the woman said to me. And after that, we began to talk about our lives. This conversations went well. It became very deep. In this conversation we spoke about several subjects: politics, sports, science and life problems. Frankly, I forgot that I met this woman for the first time. I talked about all, as if I was in my country. This woman is very friendly. She is very talkative like a woman that I had met in my country five years ago who became my best friend. Let’s go back to this woman whom I met at the train station. She is working as a clerk in a bank. She is a married and a mother of two young children. She is a good mother. She takes care of her children.

She explained to me how to overcome the problems confronted by my wife; how to support one’s family. It was like someone whom I knew all myh life. We were very open with each other despite my shyness. In my country, women are not open, particularly with men. In our society men should address women first if they are strangers.

Here in America people are more open. In a few minutes you can learn everything about someone’s life. I think there is no difference between man and woman to start a conversation with a stranger. It is equality acceptable.

I felt very comfortable pouring out my heart to this stranger, because she doesn’t know me, she is not going to judge me like friends and family do and she is not going to talk to others about my problem.

It’s very common for people who meet for the first time to confide in each other. They are comfortable talking about their personal life. The stranger can learn more about a person than his or her own family members. And after that time when I had a personal conversation with a stranger, I have never been in that woman’s position, but I wish in the future I could make somebody feel good about himself or herself.

