School for Scandal

Study Guide

This Study Guide was written by Kacey Roye and edited by Mark McCarver, with selected excerpts from public domain.

Show Runs: November 4 – November 27, 2016

Classic Theatre of San Antonio – School for Scandal Study Guide 1
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AIM High offers total immersion in design, stage management, directing, and acting through hands-on experience working on our productions during the 2016-2017 Season with professional theatre artists and technicians.

Email Director of Education Kacey Roye for more information: Kacey@classictheatre.org

AIM High interns Bekka Broyles & Luis Flores in rehearsal and performance in The Seagull, 2016
Synopsis

Sir Peter Teazle, a middle-aged and wealthy bachelor, has just married the young daughter of a country squire. The fashionable society of which Lady Teazle quickly becomes a part occupies itself mainly with malicious gossip from which no one is excluded. The most dangerous of these backbiting cliques by far is the one led by Lady Sneerwell. This lady attempts, through lies and letters written by the forger Snake, to break up the love affair between Charles Surface and Sir Peter's ward, Maria, in hopes of getting Charles to herself. She has joined forces with Charles's brother, Joseph, who possesses an excellent reputation in contrast to his brother's wild and extravagant habits. Joseph has his eye on the fortune that will one day come to Maria. He is backed in his suit by Sir Peter, who has been completely fooled by Joseph's righteous exterior. Maria sees through Joseph, however, and turns a cold ear in spite of her guardian's expressed wishes.

Sir Oliver Surface arrives unexpectedly from Australia. He hears such conflicting reports of his nephews and prospective heirs that he decides to look them over before he makes his arrival known. He approaches Charles in the guise of a money lender and, in the famous “auction scene”, buys the family portraits. He becomes impressed with Charles's sense of obligation to those less fortunate. When he approaches Joseph begging for help, Joseph is revealed in his true colors.

Gossip has linked Lady Teazle's name with that of Charles Surface, but, in reality, she has been indulging in an affair with Joseph for fashion's sake. The rumors about Lady Teazle and Charles come at last to Sir Peter's ears, and, in his dismay, Sir Peter goes to Joseph's apartment to consult with him. Lady Teazle, who is in the midst of a tryst with Joseph, sees Sir Peter's arrival and hastily hides behind a screen. Sir Peter, in turn, hides in a closet, when Charles unexpectedly arrives. Both Lady Teazle behind the screen and Sir Peter coming out of his closet are inadvertently revealed.

Lady Teazle throws herself on Sir Peter's mercy with the frank confession that she was pretending to have an affair because it was the fashion but admits that her only real interest is in her own husband. Sir Oliver meanwhile has rounded up Snake, the forger. Snake’s confession brings about a reconciliation between Charles and Maria, and Sir Peter gladly withdraws his objections to this match.
Dramatist and statesman Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born in Dublin in 1751. His father was an actor and his mother a playwright.

Most of Sheridan’s dramatic career was marked with success. *School for Scandal* premiered on the 8th of May 1777 and was a huge success. Initially the Lord Chamberlain refused to license the play but changed his decision on the basis of his personal friendship with Sheridan. Up to the very last moment before the first performance, Sheridan was rewriting the play. It has since been universally regarded as a masterpiece. Until the end of the century, it was performed more than any other play in London. Despite its popularity, Sheridan did not allow it to be printed during his lifetime. By the late 1770’s, Sheridan had become regarded as one of the leading playwrights of his day.

*School for Scandal* continued to attract larger audiences than any other play at that time. His only other completed play during the next 36 years of his life was *Pizarro*, an adaptation of a German melodrama, in 1799.

Sheridan entered Parliament for Stafford in 1780, and the next 32 years of his career were spent in politics rather than the theatre. He was made one of the Undersecretaries for Foreign Affairs and, in the following coalition ministry, was appointed Secretary to the Treasury. When the Whig Party came into power in 1806, Sheridan became the Treasurer of the Navy; but, seated on the opposition’s side of the house, he had much less influence and power.

After the loss of his first wife in 1792, he married again in his early forties to 19-year-old Esther Ogle, daughter of the Dean of Winchester. Sheridan’s last years were plagued with debt and poverty. He died on the 7th of July 1816 and was buried with great ceremony in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey.
Language

Plays are written to be performed. Sheridan’s use of wit has been highly and widely praised by audiences and critics. In *School for Scandal*, the characters’ own words reveal their true natures.

**Glossary of Terms**

- **Bate**: hold back
- **Diffidence**: doubt
- **Policy**: skill in managing affairs, pragmatism
- **Deep**: extravagant
- **Genius**: nature
- **Beaux**: young men of fashion
- **Quean**: a boisterous, impudent woman; a harlot or a hussy
- **Importunity**: an urgent, often immoral, request
- **Libertine**: an immoral, extravagant person
- **Modish**: fashionable
- **Penurious**: stingy, poor
- **Traduce**: misrepresent, slander, spread malicious misinformation about someone
- **Coquette**: flirtatious woman
- **Coxcomb**: conceited showoff

**Food for Thought:**

- Make a list of all the characters’ names in *School for Scandal*. What assumptions do you make about these people on the basis of their names?
- How does the use of double meanings in the “screen scene” (Act 4, Scene 3) add to the comedy?
- Discuss the use of witty language throughout the play. How are words and dialogue used for comic effect?
Analysis of Major Themes

Honor
Honor seems to be in short supply in *School for Scandal*: Lady Teazle is considering abandoning the ideas of integrity that she learned growing up in the country, Joseph is ready to betray his brother to secure a wealthy wife, and Charles is hopelessly in debt to moneylenders. Even Sir Oliver, whose honor should be above question, is ready to assume a disguise to test his nephews’ true nature. By the conclusion of the play, however, it is clear that only the gossips lack true honor. Lady Teazle realizes that she values her husband and has proven her worth. Charles, though foolish and intemperate with gambling and money, is honorable. He pays off his debts and is willing to help a poor relation without being asked. Sir Oliver’s deception unmasks Joseph’s hypocrisy.

Morality
Sheridan asks his audience to question the morality of society in this play. Slandering one’s neighbors, acquaintances, and friends is an entertainment. There is no real interest in the truth, and even less consideration is given to the damage that such gossip causes. In the early acts of *School for Scandal*, the subjects of such gossip are not known to the audience, who cannot determine the truth of Lady Sneerwell and Mrs. Candour’s observations. By the last act, it becomes clear that these gossips need absolutely no element of truth to fuel their stories. The falling of the screen in Joseph’s library and the confrontation that took place immediately after are fresh in the audience members’ minds. The earlier scene serves as a nice contrast to the speculation and innuendo that engages the gossips.

Truth and Falsehood
Trying to determine the truth occupies much of Sheridan’s play. Lady Sneerwell and Snake are engaged in deception and falsehood, and Joseph is willing to bend the truth to get what he wants. When Sir Oliver, disguised as old Stanley, approaches Joseph to ask for money, Joseph easily claims that he has no money. Joseph even blames his brother, Charles, stating that Charles’s free-spending has left Joseph without funds. Of course the gossips have no interest in the truth. Their goal is to entertain one another with wild speculation. When compared to such exciting exaggerations as the gossips’, reality and truth are simply uneventful.

Wealth
This is certainly a play about wealth. The poor in London were much too busy trying to find shelter and food to engage in such idle distractions as gossip or gaming. Wealth really sets the characters in this play apart from the rest of society. For instance, Sir Peter complains that his wife spends too much on silk dresses and fresh out-of-season flowers. Charles spends his money gaming and drinking with his friends, and the moneylenders are on their way to being wealthy thanks to idle young men such as him. Maria is the object of Joseph’s plotting only because she is wealthy, and Sir Oliver is primarily interested in the morals of his nephews only because he plans to leave them his wealth.
Cast of Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Actor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lady Sneerwell</td>
<td>Christi Eanes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Teazle</td>
<td>Samantha Robison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Candour</td>
<td>Alexa McLatcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria/Careless</td>
<td>Bekka Broyles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Peter</td>
<td>John O’Neill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Joseph</td>
<td>Zach Lewis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowley</td>
<td>Chad Thompson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Oliver</td>
<td>Joseph De Mott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Michael Holley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crabtree</td>
<td>Richard Solis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backbite</td>
<td>Steven Starr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Trip/Verjuice</td>
<td>Holly Clifford</td>
</tr>
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Production Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Diane Malone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Manager</td>
<td>Rebecca Simons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production Manager</td>
<td>John Coker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set Designer</td>
<td>Chris King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting Designer</td>
<td>Pedro Ramirez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prop Designer</td>
<td>Richard Solis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costume Designers</td>
<td>Jodi Karjala &amp; Terri Pena Ross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Designer</td>
<td>Rick Malone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Director</td>
<td>Rick Clyde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Board Operator</td>
<td>*Ava Valdez</td>
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Classic Theatre Staff

Kelly Roush: Executive Director
Diane Malone & Allan S. Ross: Artistic Directors
Cynthia Langston: Director of Development
Kacey Roye: Director of Education
Florence Bunten: Box Office Manager
Olivia Tober: Bookkeeper
Rita Duggan: House Manager

* AIM High interns
Lesson Ideas / Activities

Changing Genres

In groups of two or three, choose a scene from the play to rewrite slightly in order for it to fit into a different genre. Perform your scene for the class. Have fun with it!

1. Discuss what is happening in this scene.
2. What conflicts arise in this scene?
3. Discuss the characters’ personalities.
4. During the scene, what do the characters individually want and how do they try to get what they want?

Status Improvisation

1. The whole group discusses status levels in society and how status changes.
2. A group of people will often respond to each other in a manner dictated by their perceived status.
3. To demonstrate this, the group divides in half: the actors and the audience.
4. Each actor is given a numbered playing card between 1 and 10, 10 being the highest possible status and 1 the lowest.
5. Each actor holds the card to his or her forehead so he or she does not know the value of the card, but everyone else does.
6. Improvise a scene (such as a party) in which each actor treats the others as though they have the status of their card’s value. For example: if an actor has a low number, he or she might be ignored. If the actor has a high number, he or she should be treated with respect.
7. After the improvisation, each actor has to guess his or her own status.

Gossip Chain

Begin a gossip chain at the front of the class by whispering a sentence to the first student in the first chair on the first row. Have him or her pass the same sentence along until it gets to the last student sitting in the last chair on the last row of the classroom. Ask the last student to repeat the sentence that he or she heard. Chances are that the sentence will be quite different from the one that you originally whispered in the first student's ear.

Surface Vision

Summarize the play from either Joseph or Charles's point of view.
Post Play Discussion Questions

• Identify the conflicts in the play. Use these to reveal the themes which bind the story together.

• Identify the themes within the story and, for each theme, find a scene from the play which best illustrates it.

• *School for Scandal* is a comedy of manners in that it satirizes the social values, virtues, and vices of its time. Is there an equivalent in today’s world to Lady Sneerwell’s “school for scandal”?

• In the play, marriage and money are connected. How do you think social values have changed since the 18th century?

• Consider the money lending in the play. What are the relationships between debtor and creditor? What point do you think is being made about money lending?

• In small groups, discuss what a contemporary comedy of manners would look like. What aspects of today’s values would you choose to satirize? Where would the play take place? What would the characters be named?
Theatre Etiquette

Going to a play is a special experience, one that you will remember for a long time. Everyone in the audience has been looking forward to seeing the performance. A production team puts in many long hours and a lot of hard work to mount a performance for an audience. If you keep in mind common courtesy for the performers as well as your fellow audience members, everyone’s theatre experience will be optimized. What follows are a few reminders for attending the theatre.

1. Plan to arrive thirty minutes before the performance begins.

2. Gum, food, drinks, or candy are never allowed in the theatre.

3. Please go to the bathroom before seating for the performance or at intermission.

4. TURN OFF ALL CELL PHONES or anything else that can disturb the production, actors, or audience members during the performance. It is very impolite to have your phone go off during the show.

5. Lights will dim just before a performance and then go dark. Acknowledge this by sitting quietly and calmly.

6. Do not talk or whisper during the performance. The actors on stage can hear you, which is why you can hear them so well. Laughter is of course permissible at appropriate times.

7. Keep body movements to a minimum. You can't get up and move around during the performance.

8. No taking of pictures or video recording is allowed.

9. Don't leave your seat until the cast has taken their curtain call at the end.

10. Show your appreciation by clapping. The actors love to hear applause. This shows how much you enjoyed the performance!