

GOD OF CARNAGE

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EDUCATION
RESOURCE





About the Play

GOD OF CARNAGE

Two eleven-year-old boys, a stick and some broken teeth are the catalyst in this tale of two families. Veronica, a writer, and Michel, a company wholesaler, are parents to Henry. Annette, a wealth manager, and Alan, a lawyer, are parents to Benjamin. The two couples meet to discuss the misdemeanours of their sons. The evening begins quite amicably, with apple and pear clafoutis, and the four parents intending to resolve the situation diplomatically. However, as their hopes for this begin to splinter and disillusionment sets in, the evening deteriorates from one of mild unease and discomfort, into a deluge of accusations, recriminations, jealousy and rage. There is drinking, fighting, vomiting and the destruction of some rather lovely tulips. Boys will be boys, but can the grown-ups be grown up enough to resolve their differences without losing sight of right and wrong? The façade of civility shatters as the God of Carnage wreaks havoc in the living room and all hell breaks loose.

Theatre of Bickering

Most people aren't fans of ugly, angry, pointless arguments – at least not in real life. But, not surprisingly, these types of arguments are a theatre staple, and with good reason. Obviously, the stationary nature of the stage means that most playwrights will generate a physically sedentary conflict that can be sustained in a single setting. Pointless bickering is perfect for such an occasion.

Also, a tense argument reveals multiple layers of a character: emotional buttons are pressed and boundaries are assaulted.

For an audience member, there is a dark voyeuristic pleasure in watching the verbal battle which unfolds during Yasmina Reza's "God of Carnage". We get to watch the characters' unravel their dark sides, despite their diplomatic intentions. We get to behold adults who act like rude, petulant children. However, if we watch closely, we might see a bit of ourselves.



The Setting

The entire play takes place at the home of the Novak family. Originally set in modern Paris, subsequent productions of "God of Carnage" set the play in other urban locations such as London and New York. This production is set in Canberra. Setting the play in familiar surroundings grounds it- we know these people. Sometimes we ARE these people.

The design is deliberately sparse, without superfluous clutter. The room is the epitome of upper middle class style and sophistication. It could be anywhere.

The Characters

The Novaks



VERONICA NOVAK

Veronica is the victim's mother, a caring earth mother-type who turns into a wild-woman warrior; a writer, [specialising in Africa,] and works part-time in an art-history bookshop. She tells the other couple in Act I, "I contributed to a collection on the civilisation of Sheba, based on the excavations that were restarted at the end of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. And I have a book coming out in January on the Darfur tragedy." Son Henry, the victim of the schoolyard scuffle that catalyses the play, has, Veronica informs us, "a nine-year-old sister, Camille who's furious at her father because last night her father got rid of the hamster." Veronica is always right! Playwright Yasmina Reza has said, "Veronica is the character we all would like to be. She's the one who cares deeply about the adults children are going to grow up to be. The only reason she is becoming insufferable is that she's making a big effort to turn this into something positive, and she's not listened to." [The Times, 9/3/08]

Alan tells Veronica that "You and I have had trouble seeing eye to eye right from the start." Veronica comes to believe "Behaving well gets you nowhere. Courtesy is a waste of time, it weakens you and undermines you." She admits she is humourless.

MICHAEL NOVAK

"I have a wholesale company, household goods." A self-made wholesaler of domestic hardware. There is a diverse range to this man, grounded and earthy, who one minute is defending cruelty to a pet hamster [guinea pig] and next minute is conscientiously blow drying a damaged art book! Reza uses juxtaposition to compare and contrast the boys' bullying incident with Michael letting loose his children's pet hamster, Nibbles.

The Raleighs



ANNETTE RALEIGH

“I’m in wealth management.” Son Benjamin. Second wife of Alan. Annoys Michael with her taunts about him being “someone descended from Spartacus and John Wayne who can’t even pick up a mouse.” Becomes sick during her visit with her husband to the Novaks’. Fed up with Alan constantly being on his mobile phone, she believes “Men are so wedded to their gadgets. It belittles them. It takes away all their authority.” She challenges her husband, “Why are you letting them call my son an executioner? You come to their house to settle things and you get insulted and bullied and lectured on how to be a good citizen of the planet, our son did well to clout yours and I wipe my ass with your bill of rights!”

ALAN RALEIGH

A boorish lawyer; constantly taking calls on his mobile phone, dealing with a crisis, defending a pharmaceutical company that has been selling a drug that may have bad side effects; nicknames his wife “Woof-woof.” A true alpha male. Secretly proud of his bully son, later admitting Benjamin is “a savage.” Annette is his second wife; he has another son from his first marriage. Says about men: “Women always think you need a man, you need a father, as if they’d be any help at all. Men are a dead weight., they’re clumsy and maladjusted.”

Says about women to Veronica: “You’re part of the same category of woman [as Jane Fonda,] committed, problem solving, that’s not what we like about women, what we like about women is sensuality, wildness, hormones. Women who make a song and dance of their intuition, women who are the custodians of the world depress us, even him, poor Michael, your husband, he’s depressed.”

The Art of Translation

Yasmina Reza's work in London has been translated from French to English exclusively by Christopher Hampton since her smash hit 'Art' first opened in London's West End, in 1996. The following extracts regarding their working relationship are from Al Senter's program article "Friends Reunited" for the Theatre Royal Bath production of God of Carnage which opened in February this year.

It was through his agent, Peggy Ramsay that the name of Yasmina Reza first reached Christopher Hampton's ears, and it was a name that would re-surface years later on one of Hampton's regular writing trips to Paris. "Art was playing at a theatre around the corner from my hotel and I was strolling past the entrance one day when I noticed the title of the play and the name of the writer on the poster. I was intrigued. I remembered that Peggy had sent me Yasmina's first play, Conversations After a Burial. So I went to the box office and tried to buy a ticket for Art, but I was told that the play was sold out for the next month. However, I managed to get a return and so I saw the play. I was extremely impressed by how wise and how funny it was."

Hampton remembers the early days of their working relationship. "Even when Yasmina's command of English was not as good as it is now, it was apparent that she kept a very close eye on the translations of her work. She was very concerned that we wouldn't get away with anything and that her work was presented as closely as possible to the original production."



In any profession, interpersonal chemistry is essential for a fruitful working relationship and Hampton reports that: "We all had a very good time working on 'Art' so there seemed no reason why we couldn't continue. When we work together, I often find myself being reined back from giving the audience too good a time. I remember us watching an early preview of Art and Yasmina was completely taken aback by the amount of laughter there was from the audience.

'What have you done?' she wanted to know. 'Why is there all this laughter?' I had to explain that among the philistine English, modern art is generally a subject for comedy." Hampton is inclined to see Reza's plays as satires on bourgeois values, behaviour and hypocrisy. Hampton is inclined to see Reza's plays as satires on bourgeois values, behaviour and hypocrisy. It is clear that there is undoubted humour in the plays and a humour that has successfully crossed the English Channel as well as numerous other frontiers around the world.

For Hampton, preserving the humour in the translation is a matter of patiently weighing each element of the text. "You have to arrange the lines in a certain way and sometimes it's simply a matter of changing the word order. Yasmina writes in a heightened language, she has a very distinctive voice and her plays could not be written by someone else. I'll often say to her that she has come up with an unusual turn of phrase and she tells me that she has invented it. So you have to find a theatrical way of expressing such invented turns of phrase and in a way that will make people laugh. It's not an easy exercise but it's certainly fun."

Al Senter is a London-based theatre journalist and interviewer on alsenter@yahoo.co.uk

About the Playwright

Yasmina Reza

Yasmina Reza was born in 1959, in Paris, and is a dramatist, novelist, director, and actress best known for her brief satiric plays that speak to contemporary middle-class anxieties.

Reza was the daughter of Jewish parents who had immigrated to France. Her Iranian father was an engineer, businessman, and a pianist, and her mother was a violinist originally from Budapest. Reza studied at the University of Paris X, Nanterre, and at the drama school of Jacques Lecoq before working as an actress. The first two plays she wrote, both winners of a Molière Award, were *Conversations après un enterrement* (1986; *Conversations After a Burial*), involving death and sex, and *La Traversée de l'hiver* (1989; “*Winter Crossing*”), about the unlikely friendship that develops between six people spending their vacation at a Swiss mountain resort.

It was *Art* however, which premiered in 1994, that brought Reza wide notice. In the play three friends quarrel over a work of modern art—which is, in effect, a blank canvas—showing just how fragile friendship can be. The play was in production on major stages worldwide virtually continuously after its opening. It won Molière Awards for best author, play, and production; a British Laurence Olivier Award for best comedy; and a Tony Award for best play. In the satiric comedy *Le Dieu du carnage* (2006; *God of Carnage*), Reza focused on two



couples who meet to discuss a fight between their young sons. The play made its London debut in 2008 and subsequently won a Laurence Olivier Award. The Broadway production of *God of Carnage*, which opened a year later, was also critically acclaimed, and it earned a Tony Award for best play. For a 2011 film version (titled *Carnage*), Reza cowrote the screenplay with Roman Polanski, who also directed. Reza’s later plays include *Comment vous racontez la partie* (2011; “*How You Talk the Game*”) and *Bella figura* (2015; “*Beautiful Figure*”), which she wrote for the Schaubühne in Berlin and later directed in a 2017 Paris production.

In addition to plays, Reza wrote novels. Her first effort, *Hammerklavier* (1997), was composed of a series of vignettes inspired by memories of her father. She later wrote *Une Désolation* (1999; *Desolation*), a monologue delivered by an elderly man who cannot understand how others can be foolish enough to find happiness in life, and *Adam Haberberg* (2002), which centres on an unsuccessful, unhappy middle-aged writer whose happenstance encounter with an old friend from high school reminds him of how much his life and his family mean to him. Reza’s later novels include *Dans la luge d’Arthur Schopenhauer* (2005; “*Arthur Schopenhauer’s Sledge*”), *Heureux les heureux* (2013; *Happy Are the Happy*), and *Babylone* (2016; *Babylon*).



In 2007 Reza showed her broad range of talent with the publication of *L’Aube le soir ou la nuit* (“*Dawn Evening or Night*”), a detailed biography of Nicolas Sarkozy as he ran for president of France.

Reza was given almost unlimited access to a man she saw as talented and power-driven during the time she followed him on the campaign trail, chronicling both his public and his private life. Reza’s other works

include a French translation of a stage adaptation of Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* for Polanski, who performed the lead role in Paris in 1988. She also wrote the screenplay for the film *Le Pique-nique de Lulu Kreutz* (2000; *Lulu Kreutz’s Picnic*), which was directed by her partner at the time, Didier Martiny. Reza’s autobiography, *Nulle Part* (“*Nowhere*”), was published in France in 2005.

Pre-performance Questions & Activities

1. God of Carnage plays out in real time, following an interaction between two couples discussing a playground fight between their children over an hour and a half. What other plays or films or television shows [e.g. 24] can you think of that play out in real time?

2. Look at the poster for Echo Theatre's production of God of Carnage. Using the copy below, construct your own poster for the play.

A comedy of manners...without the manners.

"At 5:30 PM on the third of November, In Cobble Hill Park, following a verbal altercation, Benjamin Raleigh, eleven, armed with a stick, struck our son Henry Novak in the face."

What happens when two sets of parents meet up to deal with an incident between their children? A calm and rational debate between grown-ups about the need to teach kids how to behave properly? Or a gloves off, hysterical night of name-calling, tantrums, and tears before bedtime? It starts as a civilised discussion with espresso, homemade clafouti and small talk, but once you remove the middle class veneer of respectability, there's no hiding the savage mess beneath.

"...a farce of delightful proportions..."

3. God of Carnage has been called "a comedy of manners – without the manners." What modern examples come to mind from the comedy of manners genre: e.g. Friends, Sleepless in Seattle.

4. Make the dessert clafoutis mentioned in the play – see Appendix B.

Here's the reference to it in the play: "Clafoutis? Is it a cake or a tart? Serious question I was just thinking – Linzertorte, for example, is that a tart? Veronique replies: Clafoutis is a cake. The pastry's not rolled out. It's mixed in with the fruit. In my view, it's only the classic tart, that's to say on a pastry base, that deserves to be called a tart."



Post-performance Questions & Activities

1. Create an oral presentation [interview or hot-seat] that demonstrates understanding and empathy for one of the characters in *God of Carnage*: VERONICA, MICHAEL, ANNETTE or ALAN. In 3 minutes you will need to respond to scripted character questions and explain your character's situation and concerns as depicted in the story of the play. You will then be asked 2-3 impromptu questions. This is like a "life offstage" exercise by famed Russian acting practitioner, Konstantin Stanislavsky. You need to answer these questions based on the facts of the play and your interpretation of the character's motivation and relationships in the context of the plotline.

Here are some guideline questions:

- 1) State your name.
- 2) How old are you?
- 3) To which social group do you belong & what job do you hold?
- 4) Where do you usually live?
- 5) Who are your friends and who are your enemies?
- 6) How do you fit into the story of the play?
- 7) Do you consider yourself to be a good or bad person – why?
- 8) At the end of the play, what do you think people might say they know about you?

These are simple questions to 'break the ice.' You should then be able to respond to your chosen character in greater depth.

2. Explore and comment on the following representations in the play: belonging, attitudes to politics, work, conscience, material possessions, parenting, gender, education, racial prejudice and crucially – guinea pigs! Have a class debate on Annette's assertion that "An insult is also a kind of assault."

3. Write your own review for *God Of Carnage*. Don't forget to include references to how the play was served by:

1. Direction
2. Set Design
3. Costume Design
4. Lighting Design
5. Music/Sound Design



Caramelised Apple Clafoutis

6 medium apples (900g)
50 gram unsalted butter
1/2 cup (110g) firmly packed brown sugar
1/3 cup (75g) caster sugar
1/3 cup (50g) plain flour
1/3 cup (50g) self-raising flour

4 eggs
80 gram unsalted butter, extra, melted
2/3 cup (160ml) milk
2/3 cup (160ml) pouring cream
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 teaspoon icing sugar



1. Preheat oven to 200°C. Grease a shallow 2.5-litre (10-cup) ovenproof dish.
2. Peel, core and halve apples; cut each half into four wedges.
3. Melt butter in a large frying pan, over medium heat; cook apples, stirring, minutes or until browned lightly. Add brown sugar; cook 5 minutes or until mixture thickens. Transfer to dish; cool 5 minutes.
4. Combine caster sugar and sifted flours in a medium bowl. Lightly whisk eggs, extra butter, milk, cream and extract in a small bowl. Gradually whisk egg mixture into flour mixture until smooth. Pour mixture over apples.
5. Bake clafoutis 40 minutes. Serve hot, dusted with sifted icing sugar. Serve with cream.