

STUDY GUIDE:
Students & Educators

US Premiere Play

ANATOMY OF A SUICIDE

by Alice Birch

directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz

ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY

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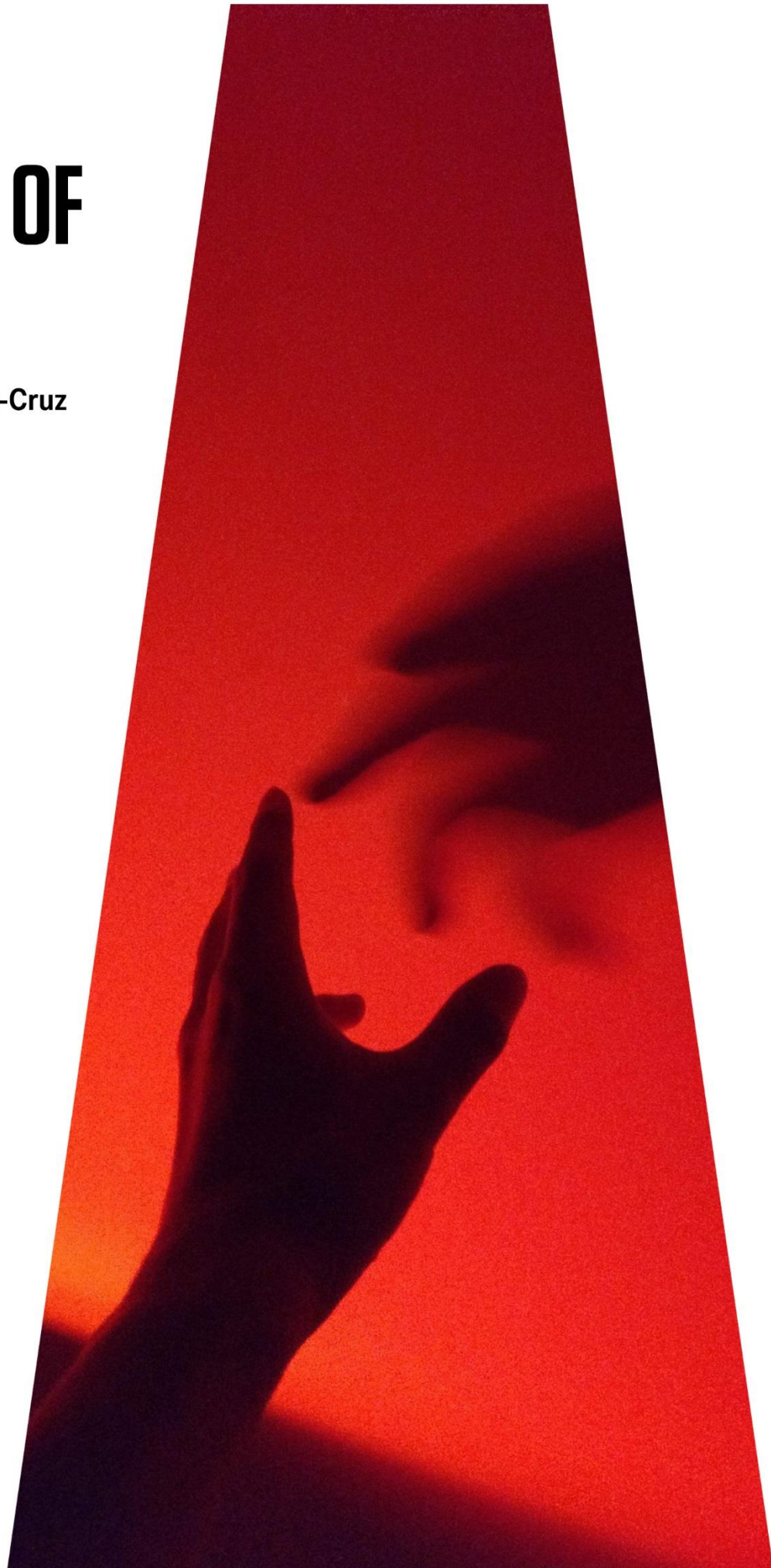


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SECTION I: THE PLAY

Synopsis

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SYNOPSIS

Winner of the 2018 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, *Anatomy of a Suicide* is a revelatory exploration of mothers and daughters by Alice Birch (Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.), directed by Obie Award winner Lileana Blain-Cruz (Marys Seacole).

Anatomy of a Suicide is essentially three dramas set in different times, all performed on stage at the same time. It concerns a trio of women: Carol in the '70s, '80s and '90s, Anna in the '90s and '00s, and Bonnie in the 2030s. It becomes apparent soon enough that this is a dynasty: Anna is Carol's daughter, and Bonnie is Anna's.

THEMES

Defining Moments

Suicide

Happiness

Mental health

Addiction

Stigma

Family

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Anatomy of a Suicide contains some material that may be distressing to some audience members. This content includes:

- Descriptions of domestic violence/sexual violence
- Intravenous drug usage
- Suicide/self-harm

SECTION II: CREATIVE TEAM

Creative Biographies

Characters/Cast List

Behind the Scenes Look



CREATIVE BIOGRAPHIES



ALICE BIRCH (*Playwright*). Theatre includes: *[BLANK]* (Donmar Warehouse / Clean Break); *Orlando* (Schaubühne, Berlin); *La Maladie de la Mort* (Bouffes du Nord); *Anatomy of a Suicide*, *Ophelia's Zimmer*, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* (Royal Court Theatre, Soho Rep.); *We Want You To Watch* (National Theatre); *The Lone Pine Club*

(Pentabus); *Little Light* (Orange Tree); *Little on the inside* (Almeida/Clean Break); *Salt* (Comedie de Valence); *Many Moons* (Theatre503). Film includes: *Lady Macbeth* (Nominated Outstanding Debut & Best British Feature BAFTA 2018, Nominated Best International Film Spirit Awards 2018, Winner 5 British Independent Film Awards 2017 including Best Screenplay, Winner Discovery Award European Film Awards 2017, Winner International Critic's Prize (FIPRESCI Prize) at San Sebastian International Film Festival 2016, Winner Critic's Choice Award for Best First Feature at Zurich Film Festival 2016, Winner Best Screenplay at Turin Film Festival). Winner Susan Smith Blackburn Prize 2018, Finalist 2015 and 2012; George Devine Award (*Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.*); Arts Foundation Award for Playwriting. In 2016, Alice was selected as one of the Creative England 50. In 2015 Alice was nominated for Friedrich Luft Prize. Alice is currently under commission to Paines Plough, The National Theatre, The Royal Court and The Almeida. Her second feature will be an adaptation of the Graham Swift novel *Mothering Sunday* for Number 9 Films and Film 4. She will also adapt James Scott's novel *The Kept* and is currently adapting *Normal People* with the novelist Sally Rooney for the BBC.



LILEANA BLAIN-CRUZ (*Director*). Recent Projects: *Marys Seacole* at LCT3; *Faust* at Opera Omaha; *Fabulation, Or the Reeducation of Undine* at Signature Theatre; *Thunderbodies* at Soho Rep.; *The House That Will Not Stand* at New York Theatre Workshop; *Water by the Spoonful* at Mark Taper Forum/CTG; *Pipeline* at Lincoln Center; *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* at Signature Theatre (Obie Award); *Henry IV, Part One* and *Much Ado About Nothing* at Oregon

Shakespeare Festival; *The Bluest Eye* at The Guthrie; *War* at LCT3/Lincoln Center Theater and Yale Repertory Theater; *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* at Soho Rep.; *Red Speedo* at New York Theatre Workshop; *Salome* at JACK; *Hollow Roots*, the Under the Radar Festival at The Public Theater; *A Guide to Kinship* and *Maybe Magic* at Dance New Amsterdam. She was recently named a 2018 United States Artists Fellow. She received her MFA in directing from the Yale School of Drama. Upcoming projects include Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *Girls* at Yale Rep.

CHARACTERS/CAST LIST



Celeste Arias

Anna



Jason Babinsky

Tim, Toby, Steve, &
Mark



Gabby Beans

Bonnie



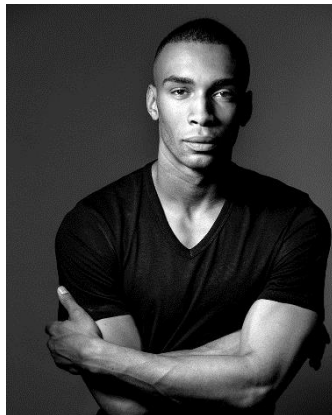
Ava Briglia

Daisy, Anna,
& Child



Carla Gugino

Carol



**Julian Elijah
Martinez**

Jamie



Jo Mei

Jo, Laura, & Lola



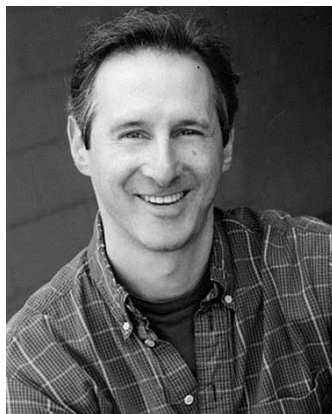
Vince Nappo

Dan, Felix, Dave,
Luke, & Nick



Miriam Silverman

Emma, Karen,
Daisy, Esther, May,
& Diane



Richard Topol

John

BEHIND THE SCENES LOOK AT REHEARSAL



Photos by Ahron R. Foster

SECTION III: YOUR STUDENTS AS AUDIENCE

Theater Vocabulary

Anatomy of a Suicide in Context

- Triptych Form
- Electroconvulsive Therapy
- Is Mental Illness Hereditary?



THEATER VOCABULARY

TEACHER OBJECTIVE

To be able to discuss theater through a common, shared vocabulary.

STUDENT GOAL

To understand that the most effective way to discuss theater and new ideas is through a shared vocabulary.

ACTION: The events that move along the story of the play and which influence the characters within the play.

CHARACTERS: Individuals the audience learns about from their actions and reactions.

ENSEMBLE: A group of performers working together to create a complete production.

DIALOGUE: The exchange of speech between two or more characters which reveals the feelings of the character as well as the story of the play.

MONOLOGUE: A speech by one actor on stage, intended to reveal the inner thoughts of the character the actor plays.

CHARACTER ARC: The change produced in a character by the events and other characters in the play.

MUSICAL THEATER: A twentieth century creation where writers and musicians collaborate to create a play which features song, dance and drama.

MOOD: The overall feeling the play evokes.

COSTUME: The clothes, boots, etc., worn by the actors based on their character.

PROP: Objects used by an actor to enhance their character. For example: Wine glasses at a bar for drinks.

SET: The constructed environment of a play where the action takes place.

SOUND: Noises and music in the play.

***ANATOMY OF A SUICIDE* IN CONTEXT:**

Triptych Form

Anatomy of a Suicide is a triptych. It is considered a triptych because it is essentially three plays displayed side-by-side, like a triptych painting. Not only do the plays work together thematically, like a triptych painting, they essentially create a fourth play, which could be read vertically across the page. The script for *Anatomy of a Suicide* is “scored” like a piece of music, rather than a typical play with a traditional plot structure.

Electroconvulsive Therapy

A medical practice mentioned in *Anatomy of a Suicide* is electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). It is a procedure, done under general anesthesia, in which small electric currents are passed through the brain, intentionally triggering a brief seizure. ECT seems to cause changes in brain chemistry that can quickly reverse symptoms of certain mental health conditions (severe depression, treatment resistant depression, severe mania, catatonia, agitation and aggression in people with dementia, etc.)

ECT often works when other treatments are unsuccessful and when the full course of treatment is completed, but it may not work for everyone. ECT used to be administered without anesthesia, leading to memory loss, fractured bones and other serious side effects, but is much safer today. Although ECT may still cause some side effects, it now uses electrical currents given in a controlled setting to achieve the most benefit with the fewest possible risks.

Is Mental Illness Hereditary?

By Ashley Davidson, on Assignment for HuffPost

Each year, nearly 1 in 5 American adults experiences a mental illness, with half of all lifetime cases beginning by age 14 and 75 percent developing by 24, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. And for those who have a known family history of mental health issues, this may lead to the question: “What are my chances of developing a condition?” But the answer isn’t as simple as you might think.

Here’s what you should know about genetics — and other factors — when it comes to your mental health.

There’s no specific gene for mental illness, but you can be predisposed.

Scientists haven’t yet found specific genes that can be linked to mental illness. Genetic markers may exist or they may not.

“It’s a complicated picture,” explained Don Mordecai, the national leader for mental health and wellness at Kaiser Permanente. “When we say an illness is ‘genetic,’ really we’re saying that there’s some component of it that is genetic. Of the [conditions] that have been studied so far for genetic markers, there aren’t any where if you have the gene, you have the illness.”

“What we can definitely see is that there is a genetic predisposition. Genetics can increase your risk, but it’s not a guarantee,” Mordecai continued.

In 2013, a study funded by the National Institute of Health found that five mental disorders — autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder, major depression and schizophrenia — share genetic roots. And in 2015, researchers at the University of Wisconsin–Madison studied a family of rhesus monkeys and concluded the risk of developing anxiety is

passed from parents to their children. But experts stress more studies need to be conducted in order to come to a more definitive conclusion.

Your environment plays an important role

What scientists do know definitively is that environmental factors play a significant role in the development of mental health conditions. These include everything from stress to poor nutrition to substance abuse, death, divorce, neglect and family life.

A genetic predisposition to mental illness coupled with environmental factors can increase the chances a child or adult will exhibit symptoms, Mordecai said. He cited a groundbreaking study conducted in the mid-'90s by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente, called the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study. It's one of the largest investigations of the impact of childhood abuse and neglect on later-life health and well-being, and is "still quite relevant," he explained.

From 1995 to 1997, researchers surveyed more than 17,000 people about their childhood experiences — including physical, mental and sexual abuse — and their current health status and behaviors.

"What they found was very, very striking — a direct correlation between a number of those events these people had as children and negative health outcomes as a result," Mordecai explained.

The study showed that as the number of "ACEs" increases, so does the risk of developing a variety of health issues, including mental health conditions like depression or risk of suicide.

Chronic stress and biological factors combined may also play a role.

Another scientific model, known as the stress-diathesis model, attempts to explain the biological relationship between someone's predisposition for a mental health condition and "major or ongoing stressors," said Jonathan

Sperry, an assistant professor and faculty member in the clinical mental health counseling program at Lynn University. The model says that the combination of chronic stressors like finances, work, academics, marital problems, or health and family issues, and a genetic predisposition to a mental health disorder can actually increase your likelihood of developing a mental illness.

Poverty in particular has been linked to an increased risk of mental illness. Children who grow up poor are more prone to mental illness than their wealthier peers, according to a 2016 paper published in *Molecular Psychiatry*. Dan Notterman, one of the study's authors and a molecular biologist at Princeton University, also conducted his own research that found that telomeres — the DNA sequence at the end of certain chromosomes — are shorter in children from poor families, possibly because of stressors like poor nutrition, for example. The shorter telomeres can lead to poor general health. Even identical twins don't share the same predisposed risk.

Just because you're predisposed to a mental health condition and experience an ongoing stressor doesn't mean you'll end up with a mental illness, Sperry said. Every person is different — even twins with similar DNA structure.

"People do respond differently to the same stressor," Sperry said. "In two twins who have the same genetic DNA, the expression of depression may not happen in one of them. One may not develop the psychiatric disorder that's in their family tree [even though] they may both go through the same stressor."

A 2011 study published by King's College London found that even though identical twins are genetically the same, "non-genetic factors play an important role in the onset of the diseases," *Science Daily* reported. The study looked specifically at schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, where heritability is estimated to be 70 percent. Because only one person in each-twin pair had schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, genetic causes were ruled out.

So, what does it all mean?

There's research that suggests if a family member has a mental illness, your chances of developing it possibly increase, Mordecai said. However, you may never exhibit symptoms if you didn't experience any traumatic events as a child, your everyday life is relatively stress-free and you're in a supportive environment.

But it's also important to note that mental health conditions can develop even if there is no family history. Mental health issues are complex, so it's vital to recognize the signs like withdrawal, excessive rumination, extreme anxiety, thoughts of self harm, periods of mania and more.

If you think you may have a mental illness, talk with your doctor. Whatever the outcome is, there's hope. Whether you're living with a mental illness or think you may be at risk, know that you're not alone and treatment is available.

SUPPORT HOTLINES

National Suicide Prevention Hotline

24/7 hotline, staffed by trained individuals, for those in suicidal crisis or emotional distress

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Crisis hotline: 800-273-TALK (8255); 888-628-9454 (en español)

Crisis Text Line

Free, 24/7 support for people in crisis

<https://www.crisistextline.org/>

Text 741741 from anywhere in the USA to text with a trained Crisis Counselor.

National Sexual Assault Hotline

24/7 hotline, staffed by trained individuals, for those experiencing sexual assault or violence

<https://www.rainn.org/> <https://www.rainn.org/es> (en español)

Crisis hotline: 800-656-HOPE (4673)

The National Domestic Violence Hotline

24/7 confidential crisis line for those experiencing domestic violence

<http://www.thehotline.org/>

800-799-SAFE (7233)

SECTION IV: YOUR STUDENTS AS ACTORS

Reading a Scene for Understanding
The Atlantic Technique Exercise
Scene Analysis Worksheet



READING A SCENE FOR UNDERSTANDING

TEACHER OBJECTIVE

To introduce the Practical Aesthetics “tools” for breaking down a scene. To understand the character and the story of the scene by relating the character’s actions to the student’s own life.

STUDENT GOAL

To understand that an important part of creating a simple, honest character involves knowing what that character wants.

MATERIALS

Pens, pencils, copies of the following scene from *Anatomy of a Suicide*, and copies of the Literal, Want, Action, As-If worksheet and/or Mini-Lesson.

THE ATLANTIC TECHNIQUE EXERCISE

STEP ONE

Divide the students in pairs. Ask the students to select which character they want to portray.

STEP TWO

Allow the students time to read the scene silently to themselves.

STEP THREE

Ask the students to read the Introduction to the Practical Aesthetic Introduction sheet and have the students answer the four questions on the Scene Analysis Worksheet.

NOTE: The four questions and the students’ answers to them form the basis for the Practical Aesthetics scene analysis and enables the actor to create a simple, honest character. They’re simply being honest to their own experiences!

STEP FOUR

After the students have completed the question worksheet, ask each pair of actors to read the scene in front of the classroom for an audience. The students should incorporate the ideas from the worksheet as they read the scene.

SCENE FROM *ANATOMY OF A SUICIDE*

JOHN

Emma's there.

CAROL

Where.

JOHN

At the house.

CAROL

Your
sister.

JOHN

Yes.

CAROL

Is at the house.

JOHN

Yes.

CAROL

You called your sister.

JOHN

Yes.

CAROL

And you told her.

JOHN

Yes.

CAROL

Is she mopping up the floor ?

JOHN

Yes.

CAROL

Could you say something that isn't yes.

JOHN

The Freezer was full.

THE ATLANTIC TECHNIQUE INTRODUCTION

ANALYSIS

Script analysis is the process of breaking down a beat within a scene. We ask four questions in order to do this.

1. What is the character literally doing?
2. What does the character want?
3. What is the essential ACTION?
4. What is that action like to me? It is AS-IF...

LITERAL: In this step, the actor determines what the character he or she is playing is literally doing according to the text.

PURPOSE: An actor has to travel far—think of this preparation as the road map.

WANT: In this step, the actor identifies the goal of the character in the scene, specifically what the character wants from the other character(s) in the scene. The given circumstances of the story inform the WANT.

PURPOSE: To focus the actor on the characters' interaction.

ACTION: Playing an ACTION is the physical pursuit of a goal. Defining the ACTION of the scene allows the actor to determine what result or CAP he or she is looking for from the other actor/s in the scene.

EXAMPLES:

- Put someone in their place | • Beg someone for forgiveness | • Get a favor
- Get someone to let me off the hook | • Force someone to face the facts
- Inspire someone to greatness | • Get someone to see the light

PURPOSE: Using an action gives the actor a task and a specific point of view. The Atlantic Theater Company teaches that the action creates character.

AS-IF: In this step, the actor personalizes the action by finding a real-life situation in which they would behave according to the action they have chosen for the scene.

EXAMPLE: Get a favor. It's AS-IF I forgot to do my science homework and I'm asking my teacher for an extra day to hand it in.

PURPOSE: To gain personal insight and urgency to the scene or beat.

TACTICS & TOOLS: Different ways an actor goes about getting his action.

EXAMPLE: Plead, flirt, demand, inspire, challenge, level, threaten.

LIVING IN THE MOMENT: Reacting impulsively to what the other actor in the scene is doing, from the point of view of the chosen action.

SCENE ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

Here are your “tools” for understanding your character:

	IF YOU'RE PLAYING JOHN...	IF YOU'RE PLAYING CAROL...
WHAT IS MY CHARACTER LITERALLY DOING?	John is literally telling Emma that his sister is at the house mopping the kitchen floor and that the freezer is full.	Emma is literally confirming that John called his sister and that she is at home mopping up on the floor.
WHAT DOES MY CHARACTER WANT?	John wants Emma to know that under his protection, everything is gonna be okay.	Emma wants John to explain to her what he was thinking by letting his sister come over to their house.
WHAT IS THE ACTION I'M GOING TO PLAY?	To get someone to accept my help.	To get someone to take responsibility
THE AS-IF...	It's as if I'm talking to a friend who is struggling to plan their birthday and I'm trying to get them to let me plan it for them.	It's as if I'm talking to a friend who directly insulted a mutual friend, they must take responsibility for what they've done.

SECTION V | YOUR STUDENTS AS ARTISTS

Post Theater Creative Response Activities
Common Core & DOE Theater Blueprint



POST THEATER CREATIVE RESPONSE ACTIVITY

Developing a Personal Creative Response

TEACHER OBJECTIVE

To develop critical thinking skills through examining a theme in *Anatomy of a Suicide* and relating that theme to an individual creative response.

STUDENT GOAL

To refine their ability as playwrights to express point of view and personal vision.

MATERIALS

Pencils, pens, writing paper.

STEP ONE

Discuss the impact of each character's defining moments in *Anatomy of a Suicide*.

STEP TWO

Ask the students to write a scene between two people about a defining moment in their lives. NOTE: Allow 15 minutes for this free write.

STEP THREE

Ask the students to share their scenes 3 at a time in a triptych manner, similar to *Anatomy of a Suicide*.

COMMON CORE & DOE THEATER BLUEPRINT

ENDURING UNDERSTANDINGS

Theater conveys the significance individuals place on their life choices.

For example:

Theater conveys the meaning behind an individual's struggle to have his or her life or life choices validated by family, friends, community, and the broader world.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Do the direction and staging reinforce the theme of mental health and mental health stigma which is of significance in *Anatomy of a Suicide*?

Do you accept the concept put forward in *Anatomy of a Suicide* that a person's life can be impacted by generations that came before them?

SOURCES:

- MayoClinic
- Unfolding the Triptych: A Speculative Poetry Blog, Nov. 2014
- HuffPost
- Merriam Webster Dictionary
- Oxford English Dictionary

Additional Research:

Skyler Hoffman

Esme Zohn

STRAND BENCHMARKS

THEATER MAKING: ACTING

Benchmark: Students increase their ability as imaginative actors while continuing to participate as collaborative ensemble members. Students demonstrate the ability to reflect on and think critically about their own work.

THEATER MAKING: PLAYWRITING/PLAY MAKING

Benchmark: Students refine their ability as playwrights to express point of view and personal vision.

DEVELOPING THEATER LITERACY

Benchmark: Students develop skills as critics by analyzing the critical writings of others.

MAKING CONNECTIONS THROUGH THEATER

Benchmark: Students demonstrate a capacity for deep personal connection to theater and a realization of the meaning and messages of theater.

WORKING WITH COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Benchmark: Students invigorate and broaden their understanding of theater through collaborative partnerships with theater professionals.

SECTION VI | THE ATLANTIC LEGACY

Atlantic Theater Company & Atlantic Acting School

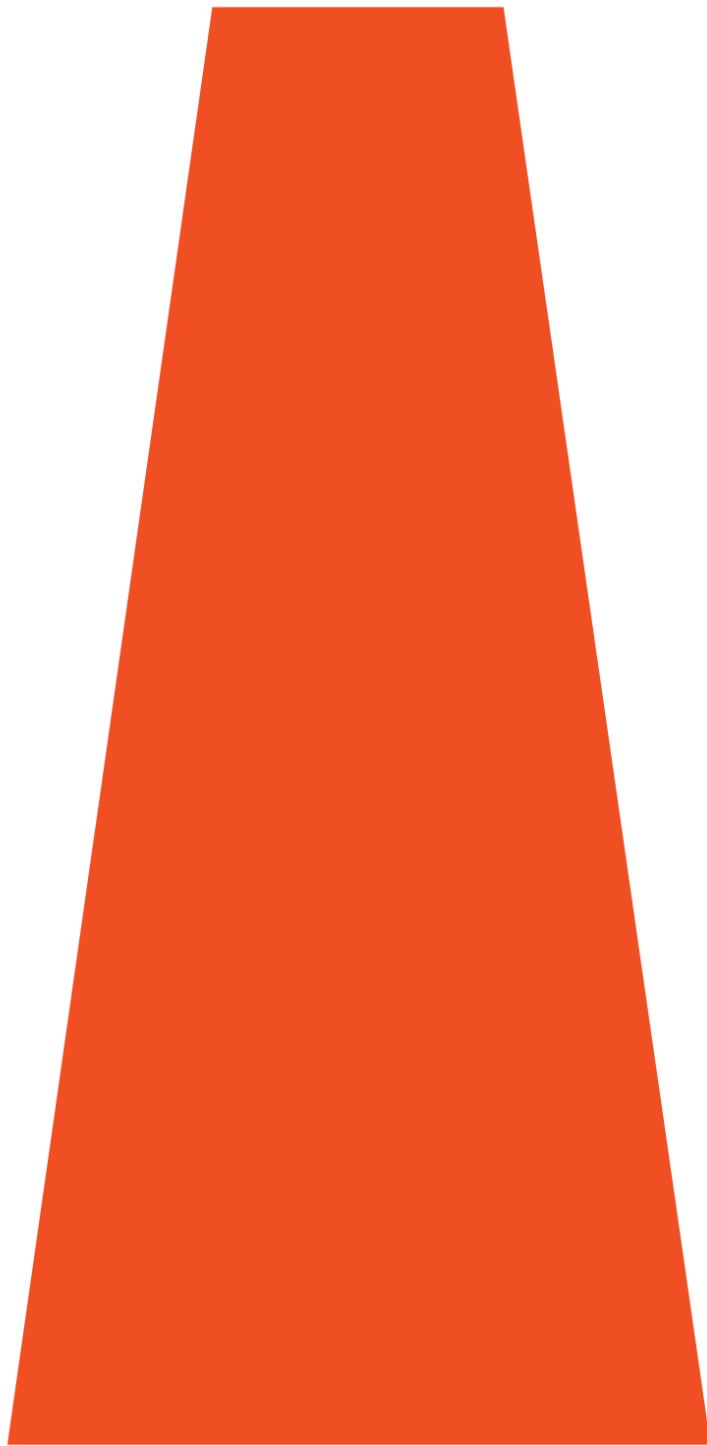
Founded as an ensemble of impassioned student artists in 1985, Atlantic



Theater Company has grown into a powerhouse Off-Broadway company. We challenge, inspire, and awaken audiences with truthful storytelling presented across our two venues, the Linda Gross Theater and the intimate Stage 2 black-box. As a producer of compelling new works, we are committed to championing the stories from new and established artists alike, amplifying the voices of emerging playwrights through our deeply collaborative programs and initiatives.

At Atlantic, our aim is singular—to empower simple and honest storytelling that fosters greater understanding of our shared world. We are a family of artists dedicated to exploring essential truths onstage, be it a show at Atlantic Theater Company or a class at Atlantic Acting School. As a producer, presenter, and educator of theater, we are driven by the belief that theater can challenge and transform our ways of thinking and urge us to reflect on our role in society. From our Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning productions to our community-based education programs, we are committed to uncovering and celebrating the stories of our varied human existence.

At Atlantic Acting School, we equip our students with the physical, emotional, and tactical tools of acting to discover their truths, and prepare them for success beyond our doors. From our full-time and evening conservatories to our NYU Tisch studio, and our after-school and summer programs for kids and teens, our immersive, learn-by-doing approach is central to an Atlantic Acting education. We have mentored and trained outstanding artists for more than 30 years. No matter their age or background, our students learn to break through their creative comfort zones in service to bringing essential human stories to life.



LINDA GROSS THEATER: 336 W 20th St. New York, NY, 10011 | ATLANTIC STAGE 2: 330 W 16th St. New York, NY, 10011 | ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES & ATLANTIC ACTING SCHOOL: 76 Ninth Ave., Suite 313, New York, NY 10011 | ATLANTICTHEATER.ORG