

# STUDY GUIDE: STUDENTS & EDUCATORS



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*Guards at the Taj* written by  
**RAJIV JOSEPH**

*Guards at the Taj* directed by  
**AMY MORTON**



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*Taj Mahal*

# SECTION 1: THE PLAY

## SYNOPSIS

In 1648 India, two Imperial Guards watch from their post as the sun rises for the first time on the newly-completed Taj Mahal—an event that shakes their respective worlds. When they are ordered to perform an unthinkable task, the aftermath forces them to question the concepts of friendship, beauty, and duty, and changes them forever.

## CHARACTERS

**BABUR**, a young Imperial Guard. He is curious, talkative and deeply committed to being a good man.

**HUMAYUN**, a young Imperial Guard. He is insecure in his role as a son and Imperial Guard - a plotter.

## SETTING

Time: 1648

Location: The corridors of the nearly complete Taj Mahal in New Delhi, India.

## THEMES

- Friendship
- Loyalty
- Trust
- Duty
- Self-preservation
- Social Change
- Challenging authority



*Playwright Rajiv Joseph and Director Amy Morton at Guards at the Taj rehearsal (Photo: Ahron R. Foster)*

## CAST &amp; CREATIVE

**OMAR METWALLY (*Humayun*)**

Omar Metwally is an actor and director who works on film, stage and television. He appeared on Broadway in *Sixteen Wounded*, receiving a Tony Award® nomination for Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Play. Off-Broadway and regional credits include *American Hero* (Williamstown Theater Festival), *As You Like It* (Delacorte Theater/The Public), *The Fever Chart* (Public Theater), *Beast on the Moon* (Century Center for the Performing Arts), *Homebody/Kabul* (Steppenwolf Theatre Company), *Creditors* (La Jolla Playhouse), *Sixteen Wounded* (Long Wharf Theater), as well as work with the American Conservatory Theater, Berkeley Rep, Trinity Rep, The Magic Theater, Campo Santo, The Rude Mechanicals and others. Omar's film work includes Steven Spielberg's *Munich*, Gavin Hood's *Rendition*, *Non-Stop*, Julian Schnabel's *Miral*, *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part II* and *Amsterdam*, among others. He was awarded the Chopard Trophy at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival for his performance in *Rendition*. Omar will be seen this spring in the new television series "Dig," created by Gideon Raff. Other television credits include "The Slap," "Virtuality," "The Good Wife," "Harry's Law," "Fringe," "Grey's Anatomy," "The Unit" and others. He directed the world premiere of Sharif Abu Hamdeh's play *Habibi at Campo Santo*, as well as work for the NY Arab American Comedy Festival. Omar is a graduate of UC Berkeley and received his MFA in acting from the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

**ARIAN MOAYED (*Babur*)**

Broadway: *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* (Tony® and Drama League nomination, Theater World Award). Notable Off-Broadway: *Masked* (Drama Desk nomination), *King Lear* (Public), *Food & Fadwa* (NYTW), *Queens Boulevard* (Signature), *Homebody/Kabul* (BAM, Steppenwolf), *American Pilot* (MTC). Notable Film/Television: *Rock the Kasbah* (Barry Levinson, dir., upcoming), *Rosewater*, *Appropriate Behavior*, "Believe" (Alfonso Cuarón, dir., Series Regular), "Blacklist," "The Following." Waterwell: Devised over 13 original productions (upcoming *A-Jax*, *Hamlet & Turning Texas Blue*), administers the Waterwell Drama Program with Professional Performing Arts School, offering 6th-12th graders theater training absolutely free of charge and with Waterwell Films, written/directed three short films including *Day Ten* (starring Omar Metwally, Tribeca Film Festival 2014), currently in post-production for his pilot, "The Accidental Wolf," a thriller mini-series, starring Kelli O'Hara. [www.waterwell.org](http://www.waterwell.org)

## CAST &amp; CREATIVE

**RAJIV JOSEPH (Playwright)**

Rajiv Joseph's plays include *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, a 2010 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, *Gruesome Playground Injuries*, *Animals Out of Paper*, *The North Pool*, *The Lake Effect*, and *Mr. Wolf*. He is the book-writer and co-lyricist for the musical, *Fly*. Rajiv also wrote for the Showtime series "Nurse Jackie" for seasons 3 and 4. Additionally, Rajiv was the co-screen-writer of the film *Draft Day*, which was released earlier this year, starring Kevin Costner and Jennifer Garner. Rajiv received his B.A. in Creative Writing from Miami University and his M.F.A. in Playwriting from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. He served for three years in the Peace Corps in Senegal, West Africa.

**AMY MORTON (Director)**

Amy Morton is an actor, director and ensemble member of Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. Directing credits at Steppenwolf include *The Way West*, *Penelope*, *Clybourne Park*, *American Buffalo* (also McCarter Theatre), *Glengarry Glen Ross* (also Dublin and Toronto), *The Pillowman*, *Dublin Carol* (also Trinity Rep Theatre), *Topdog/Underdog* (also Alley Theatre, Dallas Theater Center, Hartford Stage) and many others. Other directing credits *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at Alliance Theatre and *Awake and Sing!* at Northlight Theatre. Prior to joining Steppenwolf, Amy was a member of the Remains Theatre for 15 years. As an actor, she has appeared in more than 30 productions at Steppenwolf and has appeared on Broadway in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Tony, Drama Desk nominations), *August: Osage County* (Tony, Drama Desk nominations) as well as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Film credits include *Up in the Air*, *The Dilemma*, *Rookie of the Year*, *8MM*, *Falling Down* and the independent feature film *Bluebird* for Killer Films. Television: "Boss", "Chicago Fire," "Blue Bloods," "Girls" and "Homeland." She is a regular on "Chicago PD."

## SECTION 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

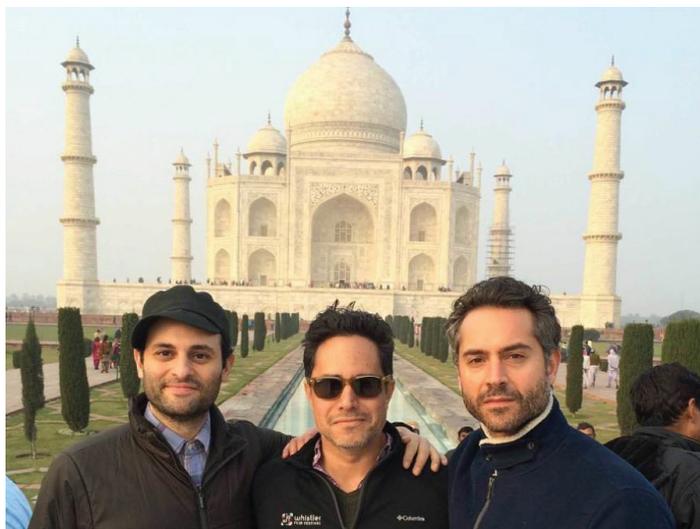
#### *Four Things I Think Are Interesting* by Rajiv Joseph

1) **LEGENDS:** Because my father is from India, I got to visit the Taj Mahal when I was ten years old and then, once again, when I was twenty-two.

*WHEN I WAS TEN, MY AUNT TOLD ME ABOUT SOME OF THE LEGENDS THAT ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE TAJ MAHAL. SEVERAL OF THOSE STORIES FIND THEIR WAY INTO THIS PLAY.*

I think it's interesting that the stories you hear as a little kid can stay with you for several years. A part of you never forgets them. And so it's interesting for me, as a writer, to revisit those stories—the ones planted in me as a child—and bringing them to life in a play.

2) **LANGUAGE:** This play was very fun for me to write because, even though it takes place in 1648 and is about two Mughal Imperial guards, I decided to give the characters a very contemporary and American style of speaking. I realized that in reality, these guys would never be speaking English anyhow. And also, because they are best friends, their dialogue with each other would be casual, they'd use slang... so I was freed up to let them speak in any way I thought was cool.



Arian Moayed, Rajiv Joseph and Omar Metwally at the Taj Mahal

3) **RE-WRITING:** I began to write a play about the creation of the Taj Mahal almost ten years ago, but it was a much different play. There were like ten characters in it, including the Emperor of India at the time, Shah Jahan, and the architect of the Taj Mahal, a Persian man named Ustad Isa. But the play also took place during the present day—it bounced around in time and place, and so it was a very large, sweeping story that was a huge mess and very boring. I decided to stop writing it because I thought it was so bad. Sometimes I would think back on it and I realized that there were only two interesting characters—the two guards to the King who simply stood there and commented on the action. So years later I decided to write a much smaller play with just those two guards. Once I started writing it, it took on a whole new meaning.

4) **PROCESS:** The actor who plays the guard named Babur is a friend of mine whom I have worked with before. I immediately knew I wanted him to be in the play, and he suggested another actor, whom I had always admired, to play the other guard, Humayun. I started developing the play with both of them. We would get together, just the three of us, and they would read scenes out loud as I wrote them. After I had a first draft, they read that out loud. And then the two of them would talk to me about their thoughts on the play. They are really smart guys, and so their ideas were extremely useful to me. Without them, I would never have written this play exactly as I did. They had never been to India and I felt that it would be a great idea if they could actually see the Taj Mahal. So we applied for a grant and we got the money to go to India and visit Delhi, Agra (where the Taj is) and Jaipur. It was a great adventure. The three of us learned a lot and we bonded as friends. It means so much to the three of us that we're all doing this play together. I had been to the Taj Mahal when I was ten, when I was twenty-two and then, this past January, I returned with my friends at the age of forty. The magic of the place never goes away. Every time I see the Taj, it's as if I had never seen it before. Something about it never gets old.

## SECTION 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From The History Channel ([history.com](http://history.com))

### THE TAJ MAHAL

Commissioned in 1632 by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan to house the remains of his cherished wife, the Taj Mahal stands on the southern bank of the Yamuna River in Agra, India. The famed mausoleum complex, built over more than 20 years, is one of the most outstanding examples of Mughal architecture, which combined Indian, Persian and Islamic influences. At its center is the Taj Mahal itself, built of shimmering white marble that seems to change color depending on the sunlight or moonlight hitting its surface. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1983, it remains one of the world's most celebrated structures and a stunning symbol of India's rich history.



*Taj Mahal*

### SHAH JAHAN'S ROMANTIC GESTURE

Shah Jahan was a member of the Mughal dynasty that ruled most of northern India from the early 16th to the mid 18th-century. After the death of his father, King Jahangir, in 1627, Shah Jahan emerged the victor of a bitter power struggle with his brothers, and crowned himself emperor at Agra in 1628. At his side was Arjumand Banu Begum, better known as Mumtaz Mahal (“Chosen One of the Palace”), whom he married in 1612 and cherished as the favorite of his three queens.

In 1631, Mumtaz Mahal died after giving birth to the couple's 14th child. The grieving Shah Jahan, known for commissioning a number of impressive structures throughout his reign, ordered the building of a magnificent mausoleum across the Yamuna River from his own royal palace at Agra. Construction began around 1632 and would continue for the next two decades. The chief architect was probably Ustad Ahmad Lahouri, an Indian of Persian descent who would later be credited with designing the Red Fort at Delhi. In all, more than 20,000 workers from India, Persia, Europe and the Ottoman Empire, along with some 1,000 elephants, were brought in to build the mausoleum complex.

## SECTION 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Named the Taj Mahal in honor of Mumtaz Mahal, the mausoleum was constructed of white marble inlaid with semi-precious stones (including jade, crystal, lapis lazuli, amethyst and turquoise) forming intricate designs in a technique known as *pietra dura*. Its central dome reached a height of 240 feet (73 meters) and was surrounded by four smaller domes; four slender towers, or minarets, stood at the corners. In accordance with Islamic tradition, verses from the Quran were inscribed in calligraphy on the arched entrances to the mausoleum, in addition to numerous other sections of the complex. Inside the mausoleum, an octagonal marble chamber adorned with carvings and semi-precious stones housed the cenotaph, or false tomb, of Mumtaz Mahal. The real sarcophagus containing her actual remains lay below, at garden level.

The rest of the Taj Mahal complex included a main gateway of red sandstone and a square garden divided into quarters by long pools of water, as well as a red sandstone mosque and an identical building called a *jawab* (or “mirror”) directly across from the mosque. Traditional Mughal building practice would allow no future alterations to be made to the complex. As the story goes, Shah Jahan intended to build a second grand mausoleum across the Yamuna River from the Taj Mahal, where his own remains would be buried when he died; the two structures were to have been connected by a bridge. In fact, Aurangzeb (Shah Jahan’s third son with Mumtaz Mahal) deposed his ailing father in 1658 and took power himself. Shah Jahan lived out the last years of his life under house arrest in a tower of the Red Fort at Agra, with a view of the majestic resting place he had constructed for his wife; when he died in 1666, he was buried next to her.

### TAJ MAHAL OVER THE YEARS

Under Aurangzeb’s long rule (1658-1707), the Mughal empire reached the height of its strength. However, his militant Muslim policies, including the destruction of many Hindu temples and shrines, undermined the enduring strength of the empire and led to its demise by the mid-18th century. Even as Mughal power crumbled, the Taj Mahal suffered from neglect and disrepair in the two centuries after Shah Jahan’s death. Near the turn of the 19th century, Lord Curzon, then British viceroy of India, ordered a major restoration of the mausoleum complex as part of a colonial effort to preserve India’s artistic and cultural heritage.

Today, some 3 million people a year (or around 45,000 a day during peak tourist season) visit the Taj Mahal. Air pollution from nearby factories and automobiles poses a continual threat to the mausoleum’s gleaming white marble façade, and in 1998, India’s Supreme Court ordered a number of anti-pollution measures to protect the building from deterioration. Some factories were closed, while vehicular traffic was banned from the immediate vicinity of the complex.



Shah Jahan

## SECTION 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### DID YOU KNOW?

According to one gruesome (and most likely sensational) story, Shah Jahan had his minions cut off the hands of the Taj Mahal's architect and his workers after the structure was completed, ensuring they would never build another of its kind.

*Guards at the Taj* brings this popular legend to life on stage in an exploration of the crossroad between duty and moral responsibility.



*Mumtaz Mahal*

# SECTION 2: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## WHAT ELSE WAS HAPPENING IN 1648?

**JANUARY 21:** Lord Baltimore's representative, Margaret Brent, was ejected from the Maryland Council after requesting right to vote. She is recognized as the "Mother of Maryland."

**MAY 13:** Shah Jahan's renovations of the Red Fort at Delhi is completed. Shah Jahan erected many monuments during his reign as emperor of India. The Red Fort was completed as the Taj Mahal was also being erected.

**JUNE 10:** Moscow's people uprising against the tsar's advisor, Boris Morozov, in the Moscow Uprising of 1648, also known as "the Salt Riots." He was exiled in what was one of the first troublesome events in the storied reign of tsar Alexei I.

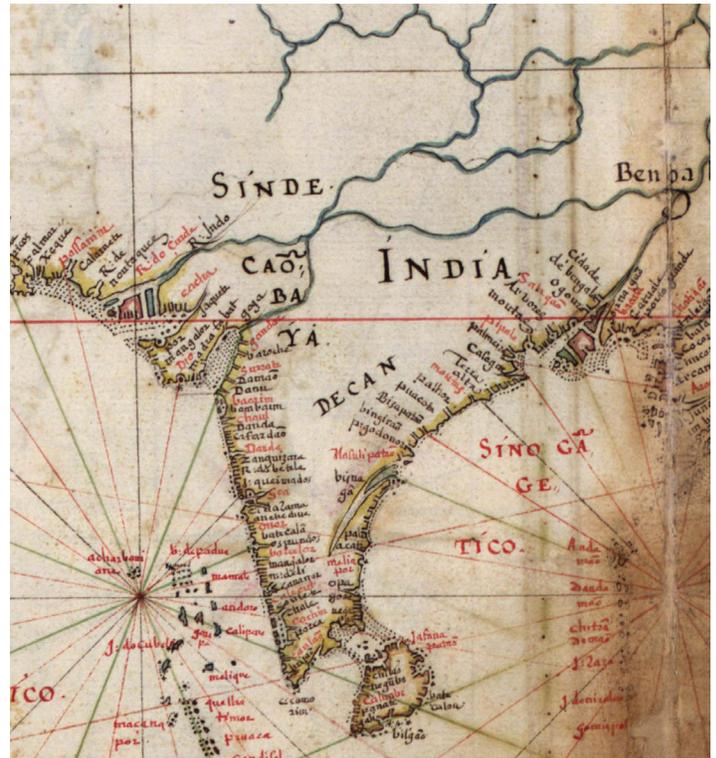
**JUNE 24:** Cossacks murder 2,000 Jews & 600 Polish Catholics in Ukraine. Between this and other devastating events, the 1640's saw the largest massacre of Jewish people until the rise of Hitler and the Holocaust 300 years later.

**OCTOBER 4:** Peter Stuyvesant, the last Director General of New Netherland (now New York) establishes America's first volunteer firefighters.

**NOVEMBER 26:** Pope Innocent X condemns Peace of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years' War in the Holy Roman Empire and the Eighty Years' War which recognized Dutch Independence from Spain.

**NOVEMBER 30:** The English Parliamentary army captures King Charles I, a result of the second English Civil War. He endured house arrest, a brief trial, and was executed in January of 1649.

**DECEMBER 6:** Pride's Purge: Thomas Pride prevents 96 Presbyterians from sitting in English Parliament. It is recognized as the only coup de tas in English history. The Long Parliament was eventually restored, where it promptly disbanded again, paving the way for the Convention Parliament. The Convention Parliament restored the monarchy by proclaiming Charles II King.



Map of India Circa 1630

# SECTION 3: YOUR STUDENTS AS AUDIENCE

*“Plays should tell simple, honest stories.”*

- David Mamet, American playwright  
& noted actor, William H. Macy,  
founders of Atlantic Theater Company

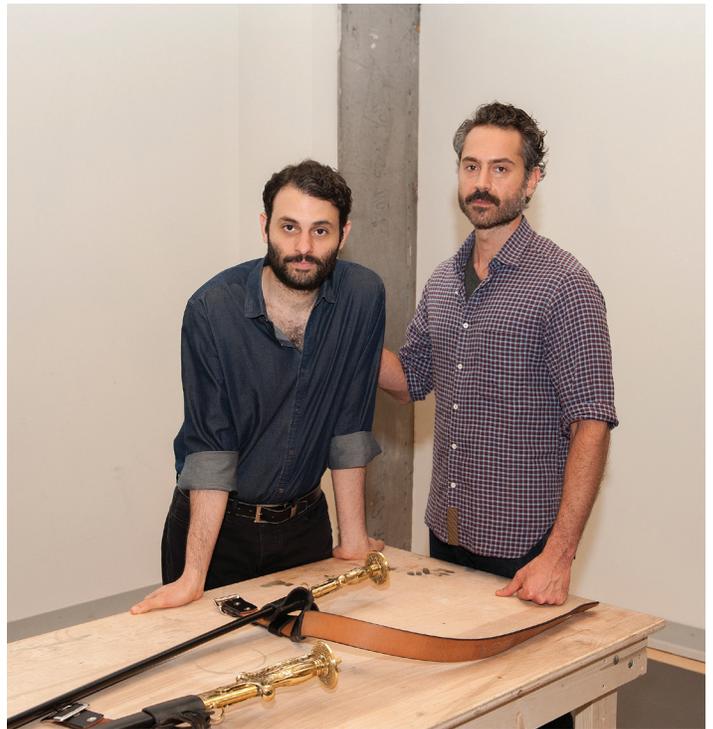
The following activities will assist your students in understanding the intentions of the playwright in telling a simple story.

## TEACHER OBJECTIVE

To introduce students to the characters, setting, and story of *Guards at the Taj*.

## STUDENT GOAL

To understand that actors, working together, will simply and truthfully create the story of the play.



Actors Arian Moayed and Omar Metwally at *Guards at the Taj* Rehearsal (Photo: Ahron R. Foster)

# 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.



Bobby Frederick Tilley II discusses costume design at *Guards at the Taj* rehearsal. (Photo: Doug Hamilton)

**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 characters which reveals the feelings of the character as well as the story of the play.

**Monologue** A speech by one actor on stage which is 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 within which the action takes place.

**Sound** Noises and music used in the play.

# WARM UP GAME: THE PARK BENCH

## TEACHER OBJECTIVE

To demonstrate to students how artists manifest their skills and talent for their audience.

## STUDENT GOAL

To understand the complex nature of the *Guards at the Taj* characters' sense of self awareness.

## MATERIALS

A space for improvisational acting.

## Step One

One person is sitting on a park bench minding their own business. This person can simply hum their favorite song.

## Step Two

Another person walks on as their favorite character, musician, celebrity. Anything as long as its recognizable by the majority of the class. Big celebrities, movie stars, famous characters are more useful than politicians for this age group.

## Step Three

The person who is walking up (the one playing a character) strikes up a conversation, easily about the weather, maybe a new movie, TV show etc.

## Step Four

The original actor, will try to casually work the other characters name into the conversation, by asking leading questions, i.e. "I saw your new movie last night...." If the actor playing the character isn't portraying a famous actor they could reply with "Oh you must have mistaken me for someone else...." subtly denying their claims but not outright saying who they are.

## Step Five

Once the original actor has a solid idea, they call the character out by name. The character actor then gives them a nod of approval, the audience claps and the character actor becomes themselves on the other side of the park bench.

## Step Six

Another actor then comes on with another character and the game repeats.

## Step Seven

Then we move along down the line.

# WEBBING & DISCUSSION TRIGGERS

## TEACHER OBJECTIVE

To develop critical thinking skills through examining the themes in *Guards at the Taj*.

## STUDENT GOAL

To understand that the story of the play relates to their own lives.

## MATERIALS

Chalkboard, chalk, paper, pens, the webbing ideas and discussion triggers.

## WEBBING IDEAS

Regret  
Redemption  
Father/Son Relationship

Switch in Power  
Careful What You Wish For

### Step One

Write the Webbing Ideas on the chalkboard.

### Step Two

Have each student add their impressions of the meaning of one of these concepts on the board, and how it relates to their own experiences.

### Step Three

Use the students' responses to focus on how unique each student's perception is of these concepts. Why is this true?

### Step Four

Ask the students to discuss how their sense of personal moral compass plays a role in their own lives.

### Step Five

Share the discussion trigger and question with the class. What are the moral compasses we create for others in our society, and what do we do when circumstances reveal the horrible truth behind those moral compasses or lack thereof?

What is integrity, and can artists ever truly capture the important role it plays in personal and societal transformation?

In *Guards at the Taj*, Humayun and Babur share the following scene:

**Babur** Huma, what's going on... you said Blasphemy! You said three days in jail! What the fuck is this?! You're not taking my hands, Huma! Come on!

**Humayun** I have to.

**Babur** You have to what?!

**Humayun** I have to chop off your hands.

**Babur** NO! WHY!? NO!

**Humayun** Babu...

**Babur** What are you TALKING ABOUT?

**Humayun** Just QUIET, or it could get worse... Okay? Just QUIET PLEASE....

**Babur** You can't take my hands. Huma, it's me, it's Babur, okay? You can't chop off your bhai's hands!

**Humayun** I thought blasphemy would be the best... charge... three days in jail.

**Babur** Yeah! That's what you said!

**Humayun** I had to invent some story, so I did and I told the mansabdar my tall tale, and he believed it just fine... but then I had to go before my father... And he knew I was lying. He looks through me. He can read my mind... And so I told him... Everything about you, about what you said, and then I... Babu... I threw myself at his feet and begged him to not kill you. I cried and I begged... He was disgusted in me. But he said you could live. But only if... Only if I take your hands. (beat) I have to do it.

*Does the concept of self-preservation above all else resonate with you as an audience? As you think about your own need to be safe (emotionally and physically), consider the concept of an individual's moral compass as a pathway to personal integrity.*

# SECTION 4: YOUR STUDENTS AS ACTORS

*“Actors should remain truthful to the story  
and their character.”*

**- David Mamet, American playwright  
& noted actor, William H. Macy,  
founders of Atlantic Theater Company**

The following activities are designed to assist your students in understanding the actor’s “job.” Like every job, even acting has its “tools.”

The Practical Aesthetics acting technique was developed by David Mamet, William H. Macy and the founding members of the Atlantic Theater Company. This technique offers the actor a set of analytical tools to understand the playwright’s intentions and what the characters want. This process of script analysis additionally helps define the actor’s job on stage.



# 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 *Guards at the Taj*, and copies of the Literal, Want, Action, As-If worksheet and/or Mini-Lesson.

## PRACTICAL AESTHETICS 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 Acting Technique sheet. 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 the front of the classroom for an “audience.” The students should incorporate the ideas from the worksheet as they read the scene.

# READING A SCENE FOR UNDERSTANDING

## A SCENE FROM *GUARDS AT THE TAJ*

**Babur**

Wait wait wait. He's going to chop 20,000 hands off?

**Humayun**

40,000.

**Babur**

Because they wanted to look at Tajmahal?

**Humayun**

We need not ask why. A Royal Decree is exactly that.

**Babur**

Every worker? Every man who built this?

**Humayun**

Every one.

**Babur**

So someone is going to have to chop off 40 Thousand Hands?

**Humayun**

And someone else will have to cauterize the stumps.

**Babur**

That's a terrible job. Who's gonna have to do that?

**Humayun**

Shit.

**Babur**

It's us, right?

**Humayun**

Shit.



# PRACTICAL AESTHETICS 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

## IF YOU'RE PLAYING HUMAYUN

Here are your “tools” for understanding your character:

### What is my character literally doing?

Humayun and Babur are literally talking about the emperor's royal decree.

### What does my character want?

Humayun wants Babur to realize that the emperor knows best.

### What is the action I'm going to play?

Humayun's action is to get someone to see the light.

### The As-if

It's as if my mom won't let me go to a party with my friends and I want her to realize I am responsible.

## IF YOU'RE PLAYING BABUR

Here are your “tools” for understanding your character:

### What is my character literally doing?

Humayun and Babur are literally talking about the emperor's royal decree.

### What does my character want?

Babur wants Humayun to understand that the decree is awful.

### What is the action I'm going to play?

Babur's action is to get someone to wake up and smell the coffee.

### The As-if

It's as if my friend wants to get back together with her boyfriend even though he broke her heart already and I want her to realize that she needs to move on.

# MINI-LESSON VOCABULARY

## KEY VOCABULARY

### Literal

The process of accessing the basic story-line of the characters in a particular scene or beat.

### Want

The process of identifying the goal of the character in a scene or beat.

### Action

The actor's physical pursuit of a specific goal.

### As-If

A way to determine what this action means to me.

## HANDY TOOL KIT FOR THE ACTOR

### Acting Tactics & Tools

To Use In The As-If Step

- Laughing to get what you want
- Teasing to get what you want
- Testing to get what you want
- Threatening to get what you want
- Pleading to get what you want
- Flirting to get what you want
- Bartering to get what you want
- Bribing to get what you want
- Begging to get what you want
- Crying to get what you want
- Demanding to get what you want
- Leveling to get what you want
- Inspiring to get what you want
- Challenging to get what you want

# SECTION 5: YOUR STUDENTS AS ARTISTS

*“Create your own work.”*

- David Mamet, American playwright  
& noted actor, William H. Macy,  
founders of Atlantic Theater Company

The following activities will assist your students in understanding themselves as artists creating original work that connects with their own experiences and world.

## MAKE YOUR OWN PLAY

### TEACHER OBJECTIVE

To facilitate the students’ exploration of writing for Social Change.

### STUDENT GOAL

To understand the social change elements of the *Guards at the Taj* triggers and use them to inform their own writing and directing.

## THEATER FOR SOCIAL ACTION TRIGGERS

Use the following Theater for Social Action lines from *Guards at the Taj* as prompts:

- Even so. He has ordered that the hands of every mason, laborer and coolie who crafted the Tajmahal... be chopped off. This is the just punishment of His Supreme and Most Wise Emperor Shah Jahan.
- Well, I think the Emperor is overreacting.
- The Emperor did this. We are but extensions of his will. And if we hadn’t done OUR JOBS tonight, we’d be hanging by our necks in the royal courtyard getting our royal eyes pecked out by the royal crows. So excuse me if I don’t wallow in some misbegotten guilt all night. Was it fucked up? yes, it was. But I don’t have to feel terrible about it.



### Step One

Separate students into groups of two. One student within each group should be the director and one should be the playwright.

### Step Two

Assign each pair a *Guards at the Taj* trigger line. It is up to the playwright and director to discuss a location and time period that this line could take place in.

### Step Three

The playwright should then write a one page monologue that takes place within that setting. It must be informed by but does not need to include the trigger line.

### Step Four

The director then has control of the play and the playwright should act in a different director’s play. The director should act in a different director’s play. The director should stage and lead a discussion with his/her actor.

### Step Five

Each pair should present to the class. This can be a process over one or two lessons, or one or two weeks, depending on how extensive and final the performances are expected to be.

# PERFORMING YOUR OWN THEATER FOR SOCIAL ACTION

## TEACHER OBJECTIVE

To deepen the students' understanding of theater for social change through revisiting a scene from *Guards at the Taj*.

## STUDENT GOAL

To recognize the Social Change aspects of *Guards at the Taj* in the text and use this understanding to strengthen their scene work.

## Step One

Have two students read the scene aloud to the class:

**Babur** Wait wait wait. He's going to chop 20,000 hands off?

**Humayun** 40,000.

**Babur** Because they wanted to look at Tajmahal?

**Humayun** We need not ask why. A Royal Decree is exactly that.

**Babur** Every worker? Every man who built this?

**Humayun** Every one.

**Babur** So someone is going to have to chop off 40 Thousand Hands?

**Humayun** And someone else will have to cauterize the stumps.

**Babur** That's a terrible job. Who's gonna have to do that?

**Humayun** Shit.

**Babur** It's us, right?

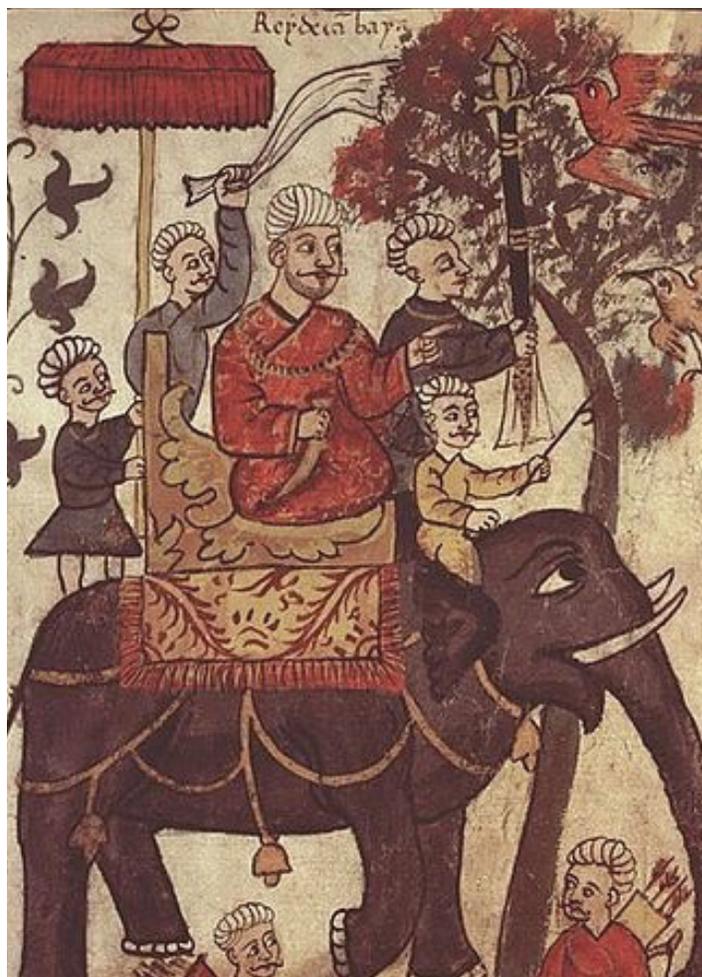
**Humayun** Shit.

## Step Two

Discuss the moments in the scene. What specific lines are challenging the status quo? How is the scene addressing the need for social change as a whole? Do the students believe they have the power to create positive social change? To challenge the authority in their lives? Community?

## Step Three

Have students split up in pairs and rehearse different social action takes/options of the scene. After a few minutes, ask if anyone would like to share their scene with the class. How did different students' takes on social action affect their performances? Were some more empowering while others offered a more realistic approach?



# THEME NARRATIVE FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

## TEACHER OBJECTIVE

To develop Critical Thinking skills through examining the themes in *Guards at the Taj* and how to relate a theme to the students' own experiences.

## STUDENT GOAL

To understand recalling vivid details of an experience is a great artistic "tool."

## MATERIALS

Pencils, pens, writing paper. An open space for performing.

## MOTIVATION

Discuss the following theme with your students: What are some of the consequences of betrayal in a relationship?

## Step One

Ask each student to write a narrative describing the sense of loyalty in their own lives.

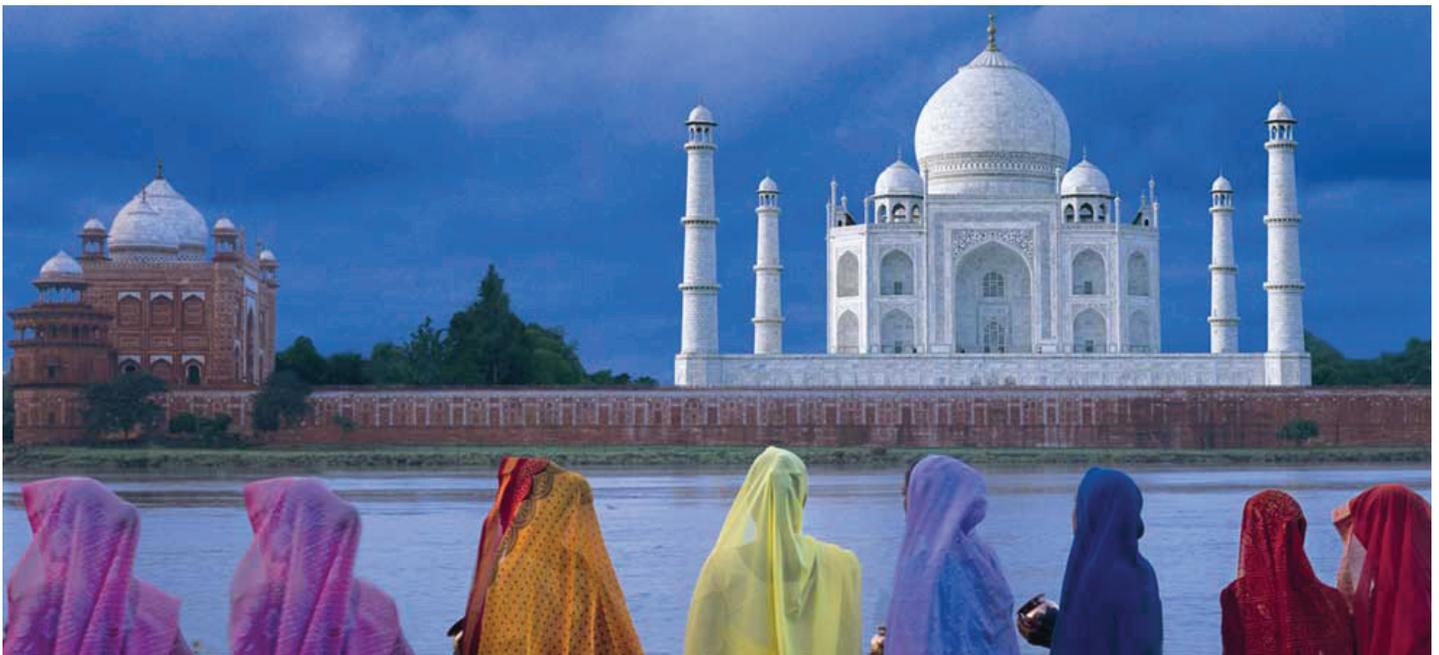
## Step Two

Ask each student to consider the following concepts as they write their narrative:

- Did you have specific beliefs regarding the value of authority in a relationship/ friendship/ achievement of a goal?
- Are these beliefs inspired by individuals in your life? Experiences?
- Are there aspects of these beliefs that you question?
- If you believe something or someone was testing your loyalty, what action would you take?
- What might be the repercussions?

## Step Three

Ask students to read their narratives aloud to each other in groups, or as a class. Focus on the truthful aspects of the story and its resonance for the audience.



# SECTION 6: EDUCATION CONNECTIONS

## ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

Theater conveys the significance of individual choices and their repercussions.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Does a playwright use their craft to effectively connect their audience to the world?

Can you define the line between following your conscience and doing your duty?

## 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

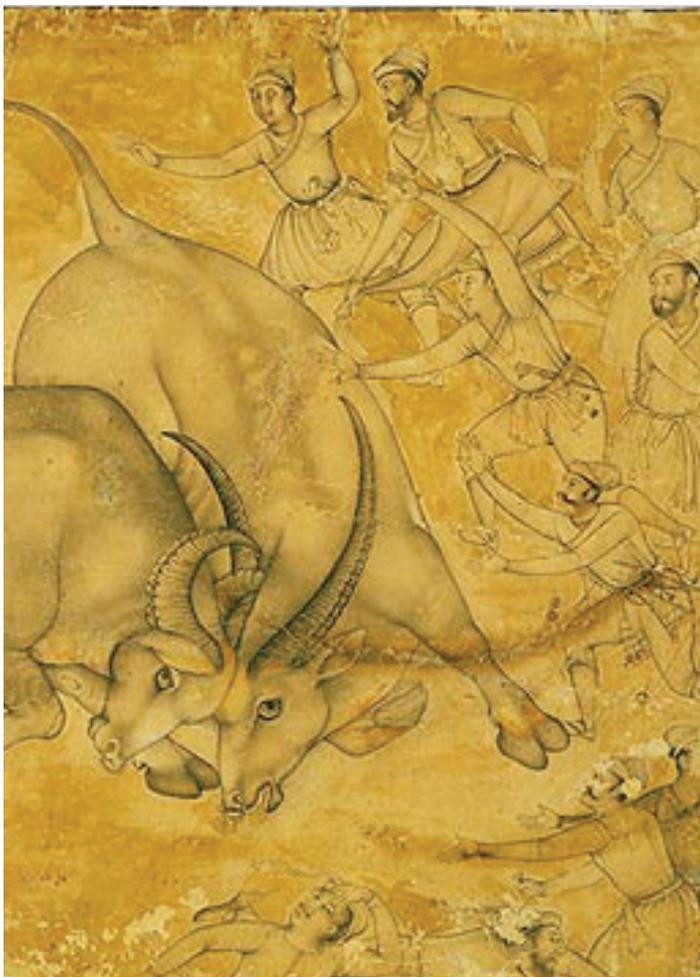
BENCHMARK: Students develop skills as critics by analyzing the critical writings of others.

### 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 7: THE ATLANTIC LEGACY

## ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY & ATLANTIC ACTING SCHOOL

76 Ninth Avenue, Suite 537, New York, NY, 10011  
Phone: 212-691-5919

[atlantictheater.org](http://atlantictheater.org)  
[atlanticactingschool.org](http://atlanticactingschool.org)

## LINDA GROSS THEATER

336 West 20th Street, New York, NY, 10011

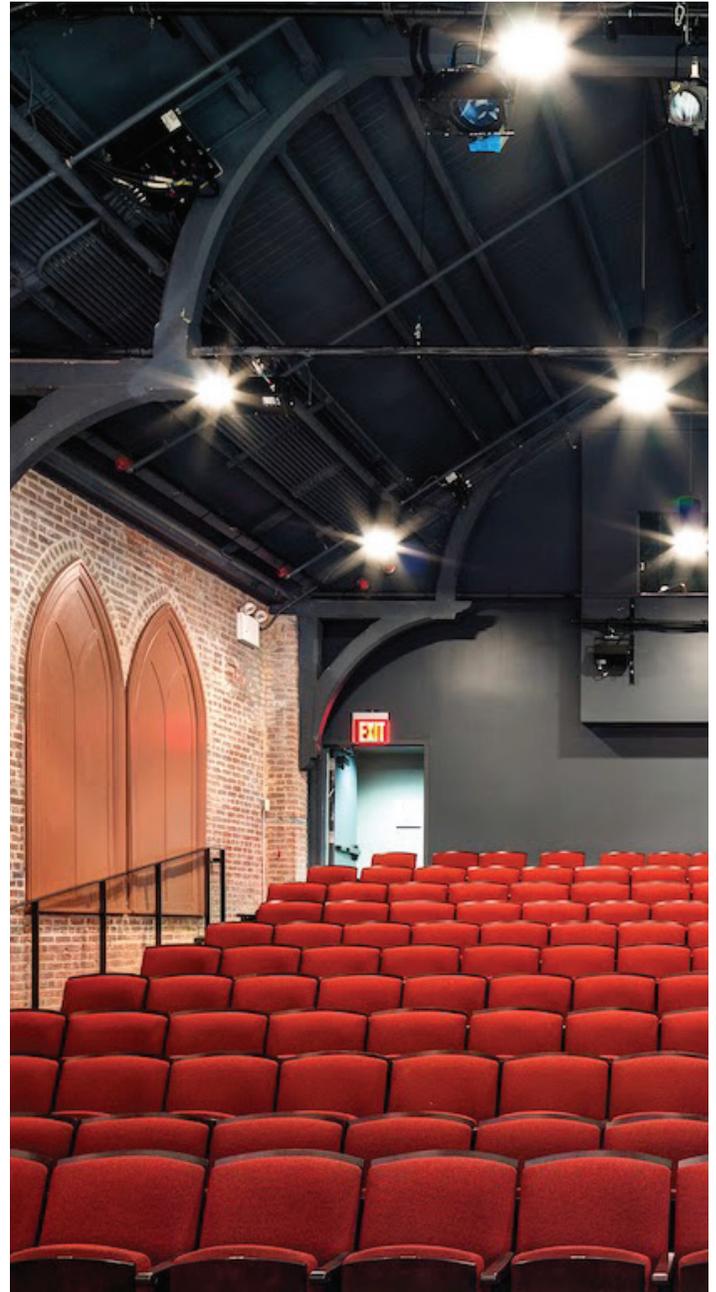
## ATLANTIC STAGE 2

330 West 16th Street, New York, NY, 10011

Inspired by the Group Theater, Stanislavsky, and a passion for ensemble acting, David Mamet and William H. Macy formed the Atlantic Theater Company with a select group of New York University Undergraduate drama students. Since its inception in 1985, Atlantic has produced more than 100 plays and garnered numerous awards, including: 12 Tony Awards, 11 Lucille Lortel Awards, 15 OBIE Awards, five Outer Critics Circle Awards, seven Drama Desk Awards, and three Drama League Awards. Noted productions include: *Spring Awakening*, *Port Authority*, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *Boy's Life*, and *American Buffalo*.

The Atlantic Theater Company's mission is to produce plays simply and truthfully, utilizing an artistic ensemble. Atlantic believes that the story of the play and the intent of its playwright are at the core of a successful theatrical production.

The Atlantic Acting School fosters new generations of actors by passing on the tools learned from Mamet and Macy and by preparing students for all aspects of a career in film, television and theater. The Atlantic offers studies through New York University, a full time conservatory program, part-time programs and summer workshops. Atlantic for Kids offers acting classes in an after school setting as well as summer programs for children ages 4 to 18.



*Interior of the Linda Gross Theater*

## DIG DEEPER: SUPPLEMENTAL READING

## AMERICAN THEATRE MAGAZINE

***Rajiv Joseph Didn't Just Write 'Guards at the Taj'—He Took Them There***

*The writer of 'Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo' took actors Arian Moayed and Omar Metwally on a pilgrimage to the site of his newest play.*

BY LINDA BUCHWALD

When New York City's Atlantic Theater Company gave Rajiv Joseph a slot for his new play *Guards at the Taj*, he told them he already had the actors who should be cast in the production. Arian Moayed and Omar Metwally had been developing the play with Joseph for years, and he only wanted to do it with them.

So there were no auditions, and the show's director, Amy Morton, had no say in casting, which is very unusual.

But it seems to have worked out: Previews for the play's world premiere at the Atlantic start May 20, and play will also have productions at La Jolla Playhouse, Woolly Mammoth in D.C. and the Geffen in Los Angeles. "Everyone knows who these two guys are, and everyone wants to have them in their plays anyway," Joseph offers by way of explanation.

Maybe so. But the backstory of the actors' involvement is instructive. It was Moayed whom Joseph had in mind from the start, having previously worked with him on *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, a Pulitzer finalist. Moayed played that show's tormented Iraqi translator, Musa, first at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in California in 2009, then at Center Theatre Group's larger space, the Mark Taper Forum, and finally on Broadway in 2011, where he received a Tony nomination.

And it was Moayed who suggested Metwally as the second actor for the two-hander *Guards at the Taj*; the two actors had met in 2003 in Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* at Stepwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, and have been friends ever since. (Coincidentally, Morton also appeared in that production.)

"I've always wanted to work with Omar—I've always admired his work," the playwright avows. "When Arian first suggested him, not only was I so excited, but I was like, 'These are the

guys who are going to do this play, and it's going to be perfect with them!'"

Joseph began writing the play, which is set in India in 1648 as the Taj Mahal is being completed, about two years ago, utilizing workshop possibilities at Lark Play Development Center. When he had the opportunity, he would come into sessions with new pages for the actors to read, often cold. After one reading of the "completed" play, Moayed and Metwally brought in such big ideas for additions to the script that Joseph went home and did a total overhaul.

"The notes that have come from them are never about 'I want my character to say this' or 'Why can't my character do this?'—they're more about 'The spirit of the play is this,' or 'It feels like there's a larger moment here,'" Joseph says. Both actors appear in a lot of new work, so they're used to collaborating with playwrights.

Moayed is also artistic director of the theatre company Waterwell, which devises shows together as a group. But this amount of dramaturgical collaboration on a single play is rare, as is the length of time the writer and actors have spent together in the trenches.

"It's usually a matter of months that you get to work on something, so to have an opportunity to let things really stew is really special," notes Metwally. "The other thing that's really great is that it's such a small cast—just the two of us—so our input can have more impact, in a way."

As if they hadn't bonded enough already over these years of development, the three took a 10-day trip to India in late January to see their play's title subject, the gleaming-white mausoleum built by the Mughal Empire in Agra. Joseph had visited the Taj Mahal before, but the two actors never had.

"So much of the emotional impact of the play revolves around them seeing it for the first time—I thought it would be really great if they did," says Joseph with a grin. Angelina Fiordellisi, founding artistic director of Manhattan's Cherry Lane Theatre, funded the travel through her organization, the Williams Family Foundation.

The visit proved immediately valuable. As Joseph recalls, "My favorite moment of the entire trip was when the three of us first stepped through the gates and just stared at the Taj for 10 minutes without really saying anything."

# DIG DEEPER: SUPPLEMENTAL READING

As *Guards at the Taj* mixes legend with truth, the collaborators had been reading up on both the real histories of the period as well as the myths about it. Seeing the building in person added another layer.

“The way it triggers the imagination and makes this stuff real is invaluable,” Matwally testifies. “There’s this divide of centuries and culture, but suddenly we were there walking around in these places, and it became much more immediate and much more accessible for us.”

“Every inch of the place has the imprints of love and work and prestige and power and sweat,” adds Moayed. “Being there, touching it, feeling it—I can feel the texture of the walls on my hand now. What’s happened is that it’s now embedded in our DNA—you can’t get rid of it, it’s now there for life. That experience is going to impact the smallest of decisions, and it’s going to impact the biggest of decisions.”

An example: Joseph had been given a package of sketches of possible art for the play, and one of the ideas for the poster had an upside-down Taj Mahal with some blood dripping off it, showing that the world of the characters had been turned upside down (and that the famous monument exacted its toll on the workers who built it). “I liked the image, but we agreed that it feels totally wrong,” Joseph says. “It feels like defacement. I don’t want to do that. And I wouldn’t have thought so clearly about it if I hadn’t just been there. It may seem a tiny thing, but as Moayed points out, it’s also a monstrous one, as the image of the first production will be the image of the show for a while.”

While the three were in India, they also got some great news from afar. Unbeknownst to Joseph, the Atlantic had submitted the play for the Laurents/Hatcher Award, which provides \$150,000 to an unproduced, full-length, socially relevant play by an emerging American playwright (\$100,000 of which goes toward the play’s premiere production). Joseph had just read the whole play out loud to the actors as an exercise so they could hear it the way he heard it when a deluge of e-mails and tweets started pouring in about the award.

“Rajiv is a genius, but when Rajiv wins for a project that we’re working on, it feels like we’re all winning,” enthuses Moayed. “I was super-excited for the play.”

These shared experiences were also invaluable for a play that’s about a close friendship, in this case between two 17th-century guards named Humayun and Babur. When I met for an interview with the playwright and the two actors at

a conference room at producer Jeffrey Seller’s offices (where Moayad’s Waterwell company has a space), it was the first time the trio had been in the same room since they returned from India a week prior, and they were catching up as if they hadn’t seen each other in months. They tease each other relentlessly, like brothers.

“We have very diverse backgrounds, and yet there’s a real commonality there, because we all have parents from places that are not America, and we all have traveled, so we share a perspective in a lot of ways,” reasons Metwally, who was born to an Egyptian father and a Dutch mother. Joseph’s father is from India and his mother is from Cleveland. Moayed’s parents are from Iran, where he lived until the age of five.

(Moayed remembers a line spoken by his character in *Bengal Tiger*: “You piece of shit man.” He and Joseph both especially cherished that line, because even though they are from different backgrounds, they knew from their own families that Musa, when angry, would skew his English precisely that way.)

After more than two years chewing over *Guards at the Taj*, the trio is ready for a production, but they’re glad they didn’t rush it. “When I was just starting out, I was just dying to get any play produced,” Joseph allows, “and now I have the luxury that some theatres would love to put a new play of mine up regardless of what it is. That’s happened to me a couple of times, and it hasn’t been good, so I have to be careful.”

At the time of the interview, rehearsals were about to start, and the three were anxious to get back into the play, and to add Morton’s input to the mix. “We want to change some ideas in people’s minds, and we want to have fun, and we want to do something special, and none of that happens in bubbles,” Moayed proposes. “It happens in an open environment. That’s where I think art can really thrive.”

*Linda Buchwald is a writer based in New York City. Her writing has appeared in TDF Stages and Backstage.*

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