

POISON

by Lot Vekemans
translation by Rina Vergano

*"An absorbing dance
around the truth"*

- Evening Standard

"Truly astounding"

- Broadway World



8 November - 7 December

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TEACHER'S RESOURCE PACK

INTRODUCTION

Hello!

We hope that this Teacher's Resource Pack will help you and your pupils to prepare for your visit to the theatre and afterwards, to explore what you have experienced in watching *Poison*, by Lot Vekemans, at Gothenburg English Studio Theatre.

Some of the exercises are suggested for use prior to the performance whereas others are intended for after having watched the play.

If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact us.

Kind regards,

The GEST team

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ABOUT THE PLAY

Poison by Lot Vekemans, translated by Rina Vergano

Two separate voices, two emotional lives and one shared story.

Alone in a room, He and She meet again face to face for the first time in years.

Poison is an extraordinary play that asks a simple question:

Is it ever possible to move on?



Kristina Brändén Whitaker and Sonny Brändén Whitaker Photo: Lina Ikse

ABOUT GEST

GEST - Gothenburg English Studio Theatre - is an award-winning theatre located in Gothenburg and is the only professional English language theatre in western Sweden.

GEST was founded in 2005 by Kristina Brändén Whitaker and Gary Whitaker to provide quality, contemporary and award-winning theatre in the English language.

GEST works with professional actors and directors from Britain and Sweden and aims to produce theatre of the highest standard, which is accessible to everyone. As well as performing in Sweden in our Gothenburg theatre, GEST also performs internationally and is always keen to collaborate with theatres abroad. We also collaborate closely with schools, colleges and universities, offering specially reduced student prices, workshops and after-show discussions with the actors.

THE TEAM

Playwright: Lot Vekemans

Translator: Rina Vergano

Director: Gary Whitaker

Assistant Director: Mia Bellouere

'He': Anders Tolergård

'She': Kristina Brändén Whitaker

Set and Light design: Diblik Rabia Leon

Sound Design: Yosef Madar

Costumes and Props: Diblik Rabia Leon & Mia Bellouere



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GOING TO THE THEATRE

You as an audience play a big and important part in the theatre performance.

It would be great if you had an opportunity to go through this chapter prior to your visit to GEST. We hope it will help your pupils get the most out of the play and gain a deeper understanding of how the theatre world works.

Below are some examples of discussion topics, observation exercises and useful vocabulary used in theatres.

1. Discussion topics

What are the differences between live theatre and film?

Things to bear in mind: two dimensional vs. three dimensional; larger/smaller than life on the screen vs. life-size; recorded vs. live, etc.

Discuss the nature of film as mass-produced, versus the one-time only nature of live performances. Which do the students feel is more valuable? Why?

What is the role of the audience in a live performance?

In what ways can you as an audience member affect the play and the actors' performances? How might a non-attentive audience affect the actors on stage, and how could an attentive audience affect them?

How would reactions such as laughter affect the experience for actors and audience alike, and how might noise such as phone calls, text messaging etc. affect them?

If you (the students) were going to put on a play on a small stage, how would you like the audience to be?

Discuss in groups and write a list of etiquette rules for the audience. Compare the rules with the other groups.

In theatre we often talk about the relationship between the actors and the audience, and between the audience members themselves. Even though the actors have rehearsed the play for several weeks before the premiere, no performance is ever exactly the same. The audience plays a big part in this too, as big groups of people often unconsciously create different kinds of atmospheres. The actors on stage can pick up on the atmosphere in the room, which affects their performance, which in turn affects the audience and the atmosphere in the room.

2. Observation exercise

Observation exercise that you can use when attending a play.

When you get into the theatre, look around. What do you see?

Observe the lighting around the room and on the ceiling. Look at the set. Does it look realistic or is it more abstract? Try to guess how the set will be used during the show.

Discuss the elements that go into producing a live performance: the lights, set, props, costumes and stage direction. All the people involved in the "behind the scenes" elements of the theatre are working backstage as the play unfolds before the students' eyes. Ask them to be aware of this as they watch the show. Observe the lighting and sound cues. How do they affect the experience and the story?

To "understand" theatre

Often we think that there is only ONE, correct interpretation of a play's meaning, when really there are very few questions in life to which there is only one unambiguous answer. A play is the result of many people's thoughts and interpretations. The director, an actor or set designer may not all agree on what the play is really about, and your thoughts as an audience member are as important as anyone else's!

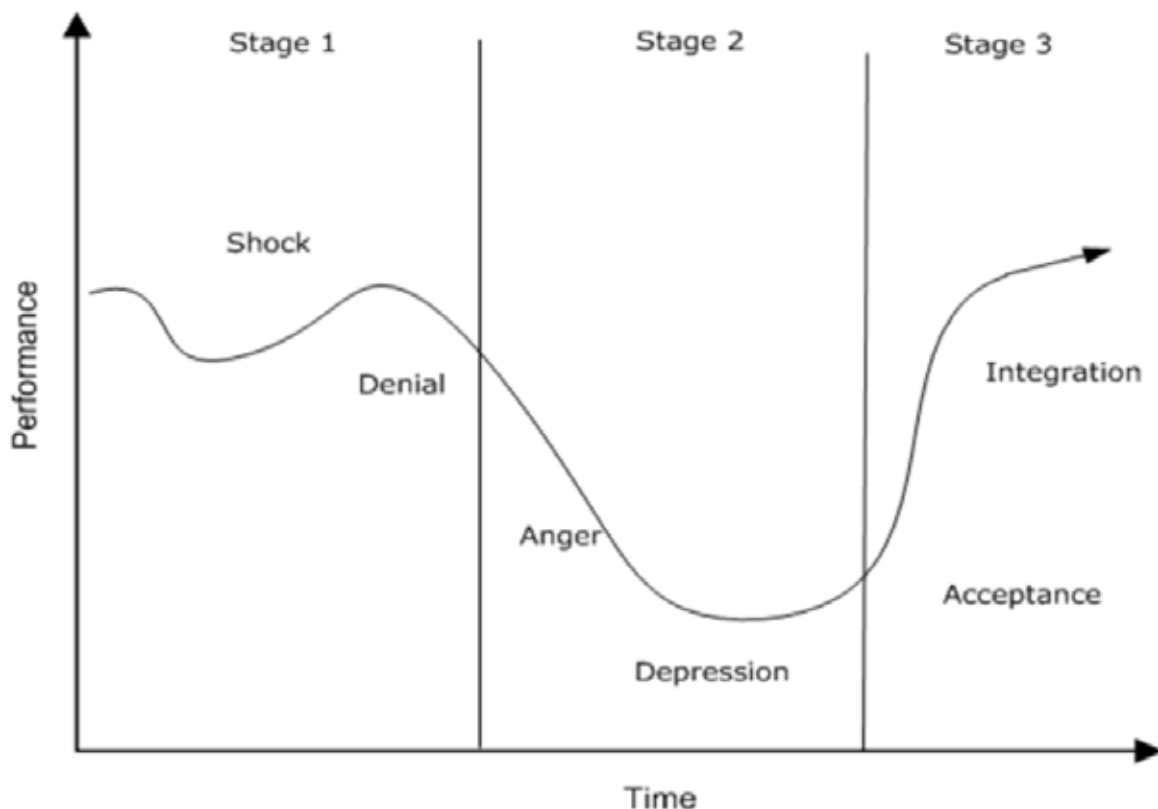
Quite often it can be more fruitful to ask yourself what the play made you feel or think, rather than focusing on what the play was about or what the playwright really meant.

Remember that in the arts, there are no wrong answers!

ABOUT GRIEF

The backstory of this play is the loss of a child, which brings immense grief into the lives of his parents. **Many people have different ways of dealing with grief**, as the play will demonstrate. Grief can also arise from many situations outside the death of a loved one, such as the loss of something important to you, like an opportunity you were looking forward to, or a big change in your life that might mean the way you live will be changed forever.

There are many models relating to grief that have been created by academics to help people navigate through the emotions that such loss can bring. Perhaps the most well-known one is **the Kübler-Ross Change Curve, commonly referred to as the “five stages of grief”**. The students might have come across this before. The names of each stage have been changed through the years. The model below groups the stages into three umbrella stages:



The University of Exeter

ABOUT GRIEF

Stage One involves shock and denial, associated with the common feelings of focusing on the past and people will convince themselves that no change is actually going to happen. People might reject involvement in taking part in any future planning and feel threatened.

In Stage Two, anger takes control and can lash out at any scapegoat to release the contained feelings from Stage One. As anger wears off and realisation of the situation comes to light, feelings of low mood, apathy, isolation, and remoteness start to settle as the individual moves into a depressive state.

Stage Three represents the conclusion of the grieving process. However, this does not mean that a person is completely over their grief. The three stages can act as a cycle, as emotions during duress are complicated and situations change. What other situations can you think of, where these stages might be observed?

There are many tools to help people going through grief. If you or someone you know is going through a period of loss:

- Support them to seek help, with friends, family, and/or professionally
- Be open about feelings
- Offer emotional and practical support
- Remember to get the support you need whilst supporting a friend
- Remember you are not alone

For more tools on dealing with grief, you can refer to:

<https://www.efterlevandeguiden.se/english/the-following-months/about-grief.html>

<https://www.krisinformation.se/en/hazards-and-risks/injuries/caring-for-others-in-times-of-crisis>

GLOSSARY

Figuratively	To speak figuratively is to use words and phrases in a non-literal way.
Hearth	A hearth is the area surrounding the fireplace in a home.
Intangible	Intangible describes something that you are unable to touch or grasp.
Muck	Muck is a slang word for dirt..
Nick of time	Nick of time is a phrase used to describe when something is completed just in time, without any seconds to spare.
Pinwheels and gobstoppers	Pinwheels and gobstoppers are traditional candies. Pinwheels are hard circle shaped candies with swirls, and gobstoppers are large hard candies that are very difficult to bite into.
Pompous	Pompous describes something that is overly serious and full of self-importance.
Spinster	A spinster is an unmarried woman, usually described as an older woman who, historically, was beyond the conventional age for marriage.
Wallow in grief	To wallow in something is a figurative phrase, taken from the action of wallowing (to lie or roll around slowly in earth or water), to describe the act of indulging yourself in an emotion and avoiding change of your state.
Washed ashore	Washed ashore is another figurative phrase to describe the feeling of being washed up by the waves on a beach. You might feel exhausted, thrown around, lost, and disoriented.

EXERCISES

1. Memory round - discussion exercise

Since it might have been a couple of days since you saw the performance and you might have different experiences and memories of the play it, is a great idea to start with an exercise like a memory round.

Divide into smaller groups and describe to each other what happened in the play. Start from when you entered the theatre. This is not a review exercise, so try to avoid valuing what you saw, just describe it. Use sentences like: 'When I entered the theatre I saw...' 'The actor told us about...' Or answer questions such as:

- When and how did the play start?
- How was the stage set out?
- How would you describe the actors and the characters?
- What relationships did the characters have to one another?
- What were the turning points in the story?
- How did the play end?

Using these sentences and questions, describe to each other what you saw.

2. New Year's Eve, 1999 – acting exercise

"I remember the soft click of the door closing. Just like that, as if you were going to work. Or popping out for some shopping. As if you'd be right back... I let you go, with two suitcases in your hand. On New Years Eve" (p. 37).

He left on New Years Eve, ten years ago following the death of their son Jacob. Try to imagine how this night would have been and act the scene out in pairs. Consider the reasons why He left suddenly, her immediate reaction, and her understanding that He was not coming back. What was left unspoken as each character was suddenly left alone?

3. Letters they never posted - writing exercise

Write a letter from He or She to the other person that they never posted. You can choose when on the timeline to set this letter — perhaps just after He left on New Year's Eve, or after He meets Valérie, or an alternative letter She might have sent other than the one from the graveyard.

4. The cycle of grief – discussion and acting exercise

Imagine that He and She meet again, 5 years after the play had taken place. How might the characters be different? What might they say to each other? Do you think they kept in touch in that time?

Consider where in the cycle of grief He and She are during the play. Might this have changed in the 5 years afterwards? Why? Why not? Discuss what stages you think they are in and why, as well as why they might be at different stages.

5. Grief and its patterns – discussion exercise

In addition to the above, discuss the following points:

- Are the experiences of He and She aligned with any patterns in relationships, and the different societal expectations on mothers and fathers?
- Kübler-Ross theorised that communication in the first stages of grief, then reassurance through shared feelings in the middle stages, and finally integration and consistent communication in the final stage is the key to supporting someone through grief. Do you agree, or is there more that can be done? How would you support a friend or family member going through grief? How could He and She in the play have supported each other?
- Why do you think She wrote the letter? Imagine the moments before she wrote the letter.
- To work through his grief, He begins running, writing, and singing. What other exercises could help someone going through a difficult time, and why are they helpful?

6. Book blurb - Writing exercise

In the play, He reveals that he is writing a book loosely based on his experience of losing their son. If you were to write a book about their story, what would the summary — or, “blurb” — say? Write this blurb in 100 words or less. You can use the following prompt to get started if needed:

“A man and a woman who first lost a child, then themselves, and eventually each other...”

REVIEW

Michael Billington

7 November 2017

www.theguardian.com

Poison review – intense look at divorce, death and how we grieve

Watching this prize-winning play by the Dutch dramatist Lot Vekemans, I was strongly reminded of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*. Its emotional intensity derives from seeing two people reliving a past by which they are traumatised: superbly acted, it makes for 80 minutes of uncomfortable but compelling viewing.

I wish that Vekemans, whose play has been translated by Rina Vergano, gave her characters names, rather than dubbing them He and She, since they are individuals and not types. As they meet in a deserted chapel cemetery, the key facts about them soon become clear. They were married until he walked out on the millennial New Year's Eve, have not seen each other in a decade and, while he has moved to Normandy, she has stayed in their native Holland. What brings them together, ostensibly, is a scheme by the cemetery to relocate 200 graves including that of their son, Jakob, who died tragically young.

This is obviously a play about how we react to bereavement and is based on acute psychological observation. Vekemans suggests that the loss of a child, far from uniting couples, may actually drive a wedge between them. She also implies that there are multiple ways of coping with grief. The man, who is a journalist, seeks some form of closure by writing a book about the subject and starting a new life; his ex-wife immerses herself in daily routines without ever being able to expunge her memories. But, on a wider level, this is also a play about marriage and the way separation or divorce can never erase remembered intimacies.

It is a fiercely claustrophobic play to which Paul Miller, as director, gives a strong physical life by showing the couple prowling warily round this bleak anteroom to extinction. He also ensures there is emotional counterpoint in the performances. Zubin Varla as the man exudes a restless febrile anxiety, even though he is the one who has supposedly learned to deal with death. Claire Price, on the other hand, is initially more relaxed while gradually revealing that grief can become an addiction and marital hurts never forgotten. But each actor memorably shifts and changes in a chamber piece that, as in Ibsen, shows how the present is perennially haunted by the inescapable past.