



Deborah Staples

ARMADALE by Jeffrey Hatcher
 adapted from the novel by Wilkie Collins
 April 23 – May 25, 2008
 A Study Guide for Students and Educators

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This study guide was researched and designed by the Education Department at Milwaukee Repertory Theater, and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of, and appreciation for, the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of *Armada*.

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A Brief Moment With Deborah Staples

Deborah Staples plays Lydia Gwilt in Milwaukee Repertory Theater's production of *Armadale*.

I've been in the resident acting company at Milwaukee Repertory Theater for twelve years. I was an intern here seventeen years ago. The early part of my career was very heavily based in classical theater and Shakespeare, which is great training for an artist to have. Since I've been here, I've really been fortunate to be able to do all kinds of plays and play all different kinds of characters.

Throughout the rehearsal process there have been constant line cuts, line additions, changes... and that will keep going. That's how we spent the first three days of rehearsal, doing rewrites, before we even got on our feet, and it's continued throughout.

It's mostly about storytelling - we inform more than most straight plays, so there are a lot of narrative lines, and going in we did not know who would say them. That's been part of our job, to figure out what exactly that is: who should deliver those lines, how they should be split up, what the action is. Whether the narration is addressed directly to the audience, or whether it's directed toward another character on stage. Whether we say the lines in character or from a neutral point of view. We use all of the above, depending on what's going to tell the most interesting story. It's very gratifying to figure out how we can use our language and our bodies to tell this story as a group, and it's very fulfilling to be allowed to sort of step outside of convention a little bit, be a little more creative in our solutions. It's a play based on a sprawling, 800-page novel, so there are many solutions that need to be found.

We need to be so very clear, specific and economical that your eye is only drawn to what it needs to be drawn to at the proper moment. The story seems to be popping when we keep ourselves very still and economical. And it makes the characters clearer as well. With most of the actors playing at least two different characters, and bouncing back and forth between them sometimes within one line, with no significant shift in appearance like a costume change or anything like that, we need some way to know where

we are. So if we're being economical, then the smallest little change makes you a different person. For example, the actress playing Mrs. Oldershaw is playing that she always has blood on her hands, or is wearing rubber gloves so that she doesn't get blood on them, so they're always kind of held up in front of her. Her other character, she's decided, has a bad arm: she's sort of an invalid, so her arms are down. So it's very clear who she is, even if she's standing perfectly still.

I play a single character, Lydia Gwilt, all the way through. She has a horrible, horrible past, and she has found a way to energize her life, to go on, to look for the next thing and go after it... and she feels perfectly justified in what she's doing and entitled to what she's pursuing. She takes a certain joy in her accomplishments, and she has a lot of energy. That's the really fun thing about her: she's not going to be put off and she's not going to be kept down.

I think her affection for Allan and Ozias comes as a great surprise to her. And it's perhaps her dirty little secret. I think she's so successful and so

good at what she's done in her life because she believes it: she very rarely tells a lie. She always finds a way to live the truth, in a strange way. I mean, really there's nothing dishonest about falling in love with a charming, extremely wealthy young man. There's nothing torturous about that. Lydia has found something that she thinks will make her life work. So that doesn't have to be a lie. I think it becomes confusing for her when she's no longer able to pursue her agenda because feelings start getting in the way - I think that's very confusing. So that's something she does have to wrestle with, that is a departure for her.

I think everybody in the world has to feel good about themselves. I



think it's entirely human, if you have been told that you're on the dark side, that you're a bad person... at some point you have to embrace it. You have to embrace it so that you have something to hang your hat on, something to go forward with... and I think in society we see that as well. I think that's what she's holding on to. What she *can't* live with is not being evil, having found real true love and then living with the harm that she does. Those things are not compatible. So in order to be at peace, you've got

to hold on to the image that you've created for yourself. And we often do this. Once we evolve, we try to cling to whatever persona we have in our heads, because it can be hard and scary to drop that when it's not useful to us anymore and go forward. And Lydia can't. How could she possibly, possibly live with

herself if she did?

For the bulk of our story, her ideal future is to have revenge, and to have everything that she was promised and denied. But of course revenge is not satisfying, so her motivation changes. She has a need to rise above everything... I guess to become invulnerable, ultimately. To never be in a position where anybody can hurt her again.

What's fun is that essentially there are no rules with her. She will break any rule, she will step over any line. It's very liberating, in a way. She can do what she needs to do, and she largely finds a way to be true in all of it. So that's really fun.

"Everybody in the world has to feel good about themselves. I think it's entirely human, if you have been told that you're on the dark side, that you're a bad person... at some point you have to embrace it."

A Brief Moment with Michael Gotch

Michael Gotch plays Ozias Midwinter in Milwaukee Repertory Theatre's production of *Armadale*.

This is my first Rep show. Previously in Milwaukee I worked with Milwaukee Shakespeare. I did *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Richard II* a couple years ago. Most recently, I've been in Los Angeles where I was at South Coast Repertory doing *The Importance of Being Earnest*. I'm based in New York but I grew up near Chicago in northwest Indiana. I did my undergraduate at the University of Chicago, then went to the University of Delaware Professional Theater Training Program, which a number of Rep company members and APT company members and a lot of Milwaukee people have been trained by. Myself, Mark Corkins, Lee Ernst, Jimmy DeVita, and Torrey Hanson, to name a few. There are quite a number of us in the area.

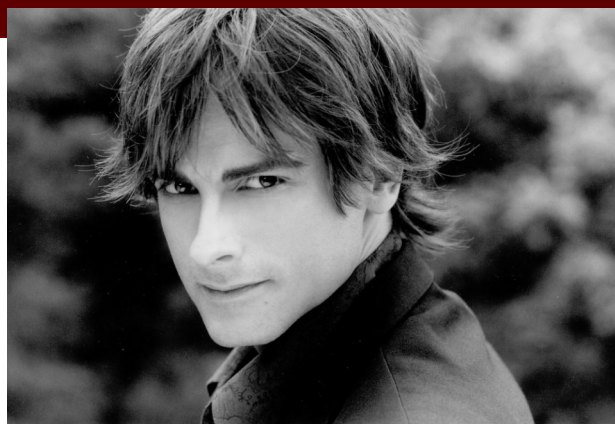
It's a challenge and a privilege to work on a new show. Usually I'm cast in shows that have been performed before. Most often I do Shakespeare, Shaw, Oscar Wilde... things that are established as classics. So not only do you already have the script, you have a whole legacy of performances to draw from in terms of inspiration - or in some cases avoidance, like "I would never do it that way." But with a new play you don't have any frame of reference, so you really have to come into it with as open a mind and heart as you can, and that can be scary. But it's also exciting, because you're not just playing another version of Algernon Moncrieff or Romeo, you're originating a role and a character that, if the show's ever done again, will be referenced as "This was the first time it was performed, and here's how they did it, and x, y and z worked and this thing didn't work." It's exciting, and at the same time it's intimidating, because really there are no rules when you're starting from that ground-floor level. You're just thinking, what do we want to turn this into? Who is this

man that you're playing? What do you want to make him?

So starting this process, with *Armadale*, I skimmed the novel - and I say that because it's like an 800-page behemoth, it's a huge, huge book, so I couldn't really read the whole thing. I kind of skipped to places where I knew my character was going to come in: what they described him looking like, how other characters described him in the novel, in terms of the way he dressed, the way he carried himself, the way he spoke - and then read some of the scenes from the novel next to what the playwright, Jeffrey Hatcher, had done in the play - the major confrontation scenes. I started thinking about what I wanted Midwinter

to be physically, what I wanted him to be vocally. An obvious comparison to Midwinter would be a character like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. A lot of people have probably seen the movie, with Laurence Olivier playing Heathcliff as the brooding man with the dubious and suspicious past, haunting the moors at night in a black coat on horseback. In a generic way, that is what Midwinter functions as in this story. If you look at the genre of this novel, the Victorian Gothic, this character is an archetype: the brooding, dark, swarthy mystery man. So I was thinking about *Wuthering Heights*, and other characters in the same vein that I've seen on film and on stage similar to Midwinter.

I like to draw from things I have seen, and they don't necessarily have to be that specific play, although I will go and watch versions of a play that I'm about to do if they exist on video. Or I'll go see them in the theater in another city. For example, if I was going to do Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* in LA, but I was in New York and there happened to be a couple of



productions of it going, I'd probably go watch them and see what the guy playing Mercutio was doing. I'd watch some of the film versions of it, from Baz Luhrmann's one with Clare Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio to the old version with Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting, and take from them what worked and forget what didn't. Some actors will say "I can't watch another actor do a role that I'm going to do, I don't like to take things from a movie version," but my feeling is, 'anywhere you can find it'. I don't know any good actors who aren't also good thieves.

Sometimes I'll cull pictures from magazines just for the look of the character and what I want to go for even in body posture - how he moves, or how he talks, or how he walks, how he wears his hair. We did a *Much Ado About Nothing* out at APT last summer where I kind of based my character's look and makeup and hair design on a guy in the band Fallout Boy. I take from a variety of places.

Sometimes I even listen to music that I think might inspire me to start thinking about what this guy is like. Music always gets me into a character. This gets more helpful as you get into performance, because when you're doing a show forty times, no matter how much you love the show before opening night, by show thirty-two you're figuring out how you can charge the performance after you've done it so many times. So you can have a piece of music that does that for you, or something like a photograph or a painting. There are a lot of diverse inspirations, so you kind of pull them all together, take what works, and use it all to the degree you think it's necessary to get through the night's performance.

"Really there are no rules when you're starting from that ground-floor level. You're just thinking, what do we want to turn this into? Who is this man that you're playing? What do you want to make him?"

Additional Information

Wilkie Collins

The author of the 1860 novel *Armadale*, William Wilkie Collins, was one of the most prolific and popular English authors of the 19th century. He published over 200 works in his lifetime, including novels, short stories and plays. He was a close friend of Charles Dickens, and published several stories in Dickens' magazine *All the Year Round*. At the time, Collins was by far the more popular author. The serialization of his novel *The Woman in White* sold more copies of Dickens' magazine than Dickens' own *A Tale of Two Cities*.



Collins' works were often described as "sensation novels," explained below. He was notable for injecting social commentary into his works, often dealing with the plight of women in his time. In the mid-19th century, women could not vote or own property, and were expected to be subservient to men. They were not to "put themselves forward" in social situations - rather, their role was to remain pleasant, supportive, and quiet. Thus, the strong and sexual female characters in sensational fiction provoked strong criticism, with Collins' Lydia Gwilt being a prime example. Collin's answer to this criticism can be found in the novel's preface: "Viewed by the Clap-trap morality of the day, this may be a very daring book. Judged by the Christian morality which is of all time, it is simply a book daring enough to speak the truth."

Life and Literature in Victorian London

The Victorian Era is a period in British history roughly coinciding with the rule of Queen Victoria, 1837-1901. Under Victoria's rule, the British Empire became the most powerful empire in history, and London grew to be the largest population center on earth. The city was extremely dangerous to live in: severe overcrowding and unemployment raised the crime rate to such an extent that even the police refused to enter certain areas of the city after dark.

Because so many working class children were learning to read and write, there was a growing demand for literature that was cheap, simple and entertaining. Authors began publishing novels as 'serials', releasing them chapter by chapter in a weekly or monthly magazine. In this way, their works reached a wider audience: consumers were more likely to pay a few cents a week for a magazine than several dollars for a full novel.

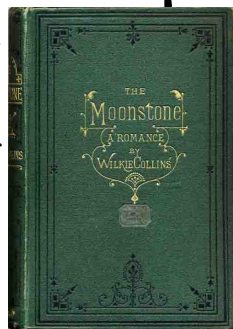
This period also gave rise to "Penny Dreadfuls," named for their price and their content. These paper pamphlets were only eight pages long and contained one chapter of a serialized story, two other short stories and a gossip section featuring news about members of upper class society. The stories in these pamphlets were sensational and grisly tales, often completely fictional but sometimes based on current events or personalities like Spring-Heeled Jack, Sweeney Todd or Jack the Ripper. It is from these stories that we get most of the myths and exaggerations surrounding these characters today.

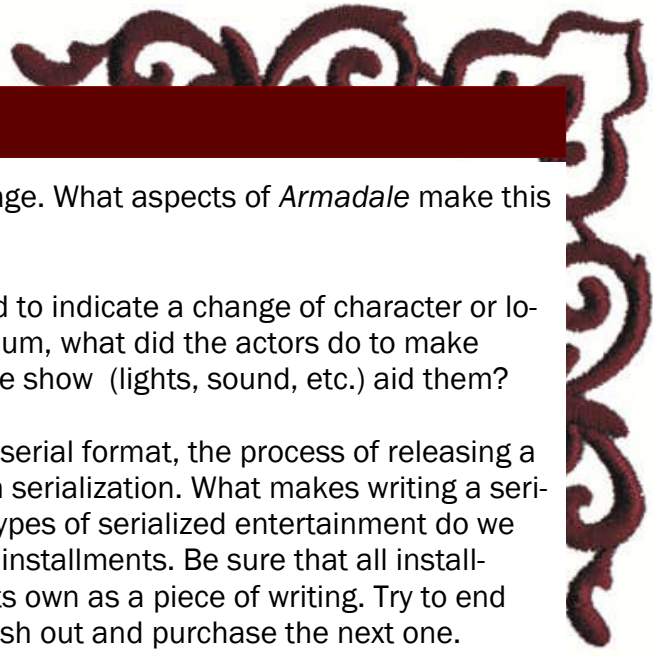


Sensation novels

Wilkie Collins wrote in the now-defunct "sensation" genre, novels aimed at producing a palpable physical response in readers: trembling hands, a pounding heart, shortness of breath. Combining elements of horror, mystery and suspense, the sensation genre gave rise to modern thrillers and detective fiction. Collins' novel *The Moonstone* is considered by many to be the first true detective novel; whereas earlier sensation novels incorporated plenty of mystery into their plots (quite often characters would have "dark secrets" or "hidden pasts," for example), *The Moonstone* was the first novel where the mystery was a clearly defined puzzle, the solving of which was central to the plot.

Sensation novels are often confused with gothic novels. Though the two genres share some trappings, they differ in tone. Gothic novels were typically grand thrillers set in exotic foreign lands, whereas sensation novels are more domestically-based: they play with the fear of what could be happening in the house next door. The gothic novel exploits the feelings of horror and dread inspired by encounters with vastness, silence, darkness, magnificence, and solitude: traditional gothic settings include haunted castles, misty graveyards, and treacherous moors. By contrast, sensation novels aim for more visceral thrills: grisly murders, vivid nightmares, and scandalous love affairs. Victorian readers looked to sensation novels to experience vicariously those feelings and acts which were considered too wicked to actually commit.





Discussion Questions and Activities

- Look at the definition of a sensation novel on the previous page. What aspects of *Armadale* make this a sensational story?
- While watching the play, pay attention to the techniques used to indicate a change of character or location. Since costume and set changes were kept to a minimum, what did the actors do to make these transitions clear? How did the technical elements of the show (lights, sound, etc.) aid them?
- Both Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens were masters of the serial format, the process of releasing a novel section by section in a periodical. Do some research on serialization. What makes writing a serialized novel different from writing a traditional novel? What types of serialized entertainment do we use today? Write a serialized story of between three and five installments. Be sure that all installments are of roughly equal length, that each one stands on its own as a piece of writing. Try to end each installment in such a way that the reader will want to rush out and purchase the next one.
- Conditions in Victorian London are touched on only briefly in this study guide, but there were many interesting things happening in the city during the period. Research one of the following aspects of Victorian life and give a short presentation on the topic to your class:
 - Air pollution and the London Fog
 - Urbanization and the Industrial Revolution
 - Working conditions and child labor
 - Public health: miasma, epidemics, and medical science
 - Housing and living conditions
 - Education, ragged schools, and boarding schools
 - Crime and the Metropolitan Police Force
 - Queen Victoria
 - Fashion, the mass production of clothing, standards of dress
 - The role of women in Victorian society
- Collins has said that the character of Lydia Gwilt was partly based on the story of real-life suspected murderess Madeleine Smith. Read up on the Smith trial. What other stories and plays have been written about her? What does her character have in common with Lydia Gwilt?
- How do the characters of Neelie, Lydia and Mrs. Milroy reflect the roles of women in Victorian society? How do they subvert these roles?

Sources and Suggested Reading

The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel edited by Deirdre David. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

A Population History of England, 1541-1871: A Reconstruction by E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981

Victorian London: The Life of a City, 1840-1870 by Liza Picard. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006.

Wilkie Collins: A Critical and Biographical Study by Dorothy L. Sayers. Ohio: The Friends of the University of Toledo Libraries, 1977.

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The Audience

You can sit there and have a universal experience, of fear, of anger, of tears, of love, and I discovered that it's the audience, really, that is doing the acting. - **Marlon Brando**

Theater is a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the ensemble performing their role expertly, from the cast and crew to the administrative staff to the audience themselves. Come prepared to make your contribution as a member of the audience. You have an active role to play, and the performers are relying on you to be respectful and attentive. Months of preparation, weeks of rehearsal and hours upon hours of effort have gone towards providing the best possible performance for you. Your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

Visiting The Rep ...

Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of Electric Railway & Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Quadracci Powerhouse Theater lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during the intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

If you arrive forty-five minutes before the show, you can participate in a FREE pre-show talk called Rep In Depth. An actor from the show usually leads this discussion. This person will tell you a little about the play, the playwright, and the period in which the show is set. Often, they will also share stories about the design and rehearsal process. You can ask questions too!



**For information on our education programs and our productions, visit our website at
www.milwaukeeerep.com**