

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater Presents

# YANKEE TAVERN

by Steven Dietz

January 5 - 31, 2010

Quadracci Powerhouse Theater



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This study guide is researched and designed by the Education Department at the 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 **YANKEE TAVERN**.

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# SYNOPSIS

YANKEE TAVERN is a new play filled with mystery and excitement. This engaging thriller follows Adam, the young owner of a crumbling New York City Bar, as he becomes entrenched in a plot of personal and national significance. While his fiancé is busy counting down the days to their wedding, Adam deals with his dead father's best friend, an aging barfly who believes that *everything* is a conspiracy. Among all this chaos, a stranger enters who knows much more than he should, in an instant blurring the lines between conspiracy theory and reality, forever changing the way these characters relate to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

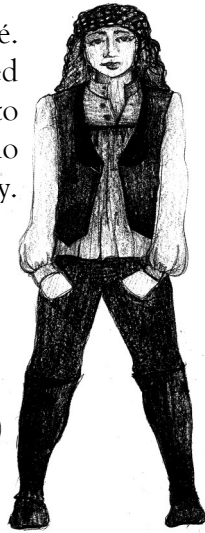
*"You can't have it both ways.  
The moment you no longer believe  
that every single thing is a  
COINCIDENCE: at that moment  
you are admitting that somewhere~  
in the great landscape of this event~  
there must be some element  
of Complicity."*

*- Palmer*

## THE CHARACTERS

Costume Renderings drawn by Holly Payne

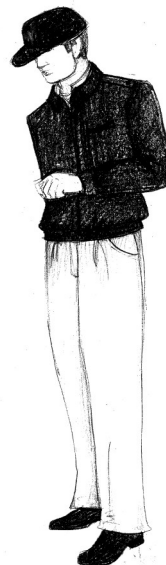
Janet is Adam's fiancé.  
She is a level-headed  
character, trying to get to  
the truth, but unsure who  
to believe along the way.



Adam owns Yankee  
Tavern, which he inherited  
from his father. Adam  
studies conspiracy theories  
for his thesis, but they also  
affect his life in a much  
more direct way.



Ray was Adam's dad's  
best friend. He is the  
conspiracy theorist in the  
group, with a theory to  
account for just about  
everything.



Palmer is the quiet  
stranger. He comes into  
the bar only a couple  
times, but shares  
information that has a  
major impact on Janet  
and Adam.

*It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. What can you tell about the characters by looking at the sketches above? How do you think the costumes might reflect the characters' personalities? Discuss your answers with a small group.*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Steven Dietz is one of America's most widely-produced and published contemporary playwrights. Born June 23, 1958 in Denver, Colorado, Dietz did not become interested in theater until he was 18 years old. After graduating high school, Dietz attended the University of Northern Colorado where he studied and worked in the theater department. He graduated in 1980 and moved to Minneapolis to work with The Playwrights Center. Dietz originally wanted to direct plays, but after a couple of years, he became interested in playwriting. In 1982 he wrote his first play, *BROTHERS AND SISTERS*. Since then Dietz has written over 20 plays which have been produced all over the nation and the world.

In 1988 A Contemporary Theatre, a company in Seattle, Washington commissioned Dietz to write *GOD'S COUNTRY*, a play inspired by the murder of talk radio host Allan Berg who was killed by a group of neo-Nazis. In 1992 Dietz moved to Seattle where he continued to write plays and work with ACT until 2006. At this time, Dietz moved between Seattle and Austin, Texas where he taught, and continues to teach playwriting and screenwriting at the University of Texas – Austin.

Dietz has won many awards for his writing including the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays award, the PEN USA West Award in Drama, the Edgar Award for Drama from the Mystery Writers of America and the Yomuiiri Shimbun Award, the equivalent of a Japanese Tony award. He continues to write and direct for various theaters across the nation.



# CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Conspiracy theories are developed to help explain events that are surrounded by questionable circumstances. They usually account for suspicious occurrences by determining that they were plotted by a secret and illusive group. These theories are often viewed with skepticism or even mocked by the mainstream media because the evidence used to support them is frequently inconclusive and unconvincing. Conspiracy theories have emerged as a cultural phenomenon and continue to be studied by many people. The term, which dates back to the early 1900's, originally was a neutral term but acquired its current derogatory connotation in the 1960's.

Since this time, conspiracy theories have become a topic of extreme interest for sociologists, psychologists and experts in folklore. Studies have shown that you either believe in all or most conspiracy theories or you believe in none at all. The impulse to theorize originates with the search for meaning and is usually very powerful. Many feel that these questionable events (such as 9/11) are too much out of the ordinary to be executed without some sort of underlying motivations. Support from social groups help reinforce the ideas and beliefs of the original theorist and continue to snowball until the conspiracy theory is accepted by many people across

the state, nation or world. Conspiracies are often emotionally satisfying to people because they are able to place events in a more readily-understandable context. The believers of a theory are able to give moral responsibility for a troubling event or situation to a clearly pre-conceived group of individuals; instead of just a random act by an individual or a few people.

Another reason why conspiracy theories have become such a great topic of interest is because of the media influence. The media often tries to understand events through any means necessary; getting as many accounts of a story from as many people possible, whether credible or incredible, in order to get “the whole story.” In fact, sometimes less credible sources actually make for a more interesting story. This sometimes results in the reporting of incorrect or invalid information, presented as the truth. Television shows and movies also perpetuate and enlarge belief in conspiracy theories as well. Films such as *Enemy of the State* and *Conspiracy Theory* present conspiracies as normal and believable.

Conspiracy theories are always under scrutiny and criticism by academics, politicians and other social groups for their potential to spread dangerous misinformation. While controversial, conspiracy theories can help people make sense of traumatic events and cope with difficult emotions. Despite the media and social group influence, each person must decide for themselves what they believe.

*Can you see ways in which conspiracy theories could be useful? Can you see ways in which conspiracy theories could be dangerous? Discuss your feelings in a small group.*

*In a small group, pick a conspiracy theory to research. What is it about? Why do people believe it to be true? Are there any problems with the theory? Present your findings to the class and get their opinion on the theory.*

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN YANKEE TAVERN

9/11

YANKEE TAVERN focuses on the events of September 11, 2001, when terrorists hijacked four American planes. Two of the planes were deliberately crashed into the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York City, one plane into the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia and the last plane, which was attempted to be re-taken over by civilians aboard, crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Over 2,900 people died and over 6,000 were injured; however, millions were affected. President George W. Bush and the United States retaliated quickly by launching the War on Terror, invading Afghanistan in order to dispose of the Taliban who harbored Al-Qaeda terrorists. This event also caused security measures at public places, especially airports and large scale events, to be increased severely. Even eight

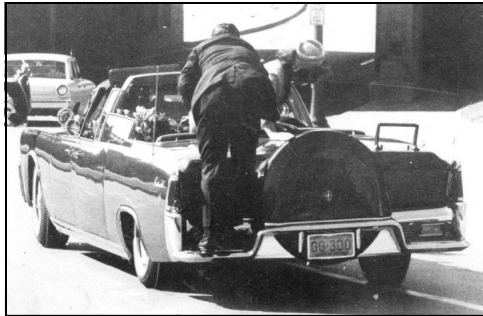


*The World Trade Center just before the second plane hit.*

years later, the US is still fighting the War on Terror in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

YANKEE TAVERN focuses on many of the most prominent conspiracy theories surrounding 9/11, which attempt to make sense of the horrific events. A few of the questions brought up include: why wasn't the Pentagon protected against attacks after the initial attacks in New York, why was the metal from the World Trade Center scrapped so quickly and why wasn't insider trading in the stock market the day before monitored closely? While there are many more details and beliefs that cause hundreds of thousands of people to question whether the 9/11 attacks were a part of a conspiracy, the majority of US citizens believe it was purely an attack on the US by terrorists.

## JFK ASSASSINATION



*Just moments after JFK was shot in Dallas, Texas on November 10, 1963.*

Another one of the conspiracy theories that is mentioned in YANKEE TAVERN is that concerning the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (JFK) in 1963. It was found that Lee Harvey Oswald shot JFK while he was riding in an open-top car, and that he acted alone. Oswald was murdered by a nightclub owner when he was being transferred to the county jail. However, many people questioned whether the murder of JFK was so straightforward. Theories emerged proposing that Oswald was innocent, that there was more than one gunman, even that the CIA was responsible for the murder. While most people believe that Oswald acted alone, other theories continue to evolve to this day.

## FIRST MOON LANDING

A different conspiracy theory referenced in the play concerns the moon landing. The first Americans on the moon landed in 1969. There are recorded images and sounds from the expedition. However, despite this visual evidence, many people believe that it was all fabricated in a Hollywood studio. People claim that the footage is too clear, that there are no stars in the background and that since the moon is closer to the sun than the earth the temperature would be too hot for cameras to survive. Others claim that the moon rocks brought back were fake and made out of materials such as clay and paint. Since this time, there have been many expeditions into outer space convincing most people that the moon landing was indeed real, but there are still many people who continue to question the validity of the 1969 moon landing.



*A photo from the moon landing on July 20, 1969 shows Neil Armstrong in front of the lunar module and American flag.*

***Ask your parents or grandparents where they were when President John F. Kennedy was shot and when the US landed on the moon. How did they feel? How did the event impact their life? Discuss these questions with your classmates.***

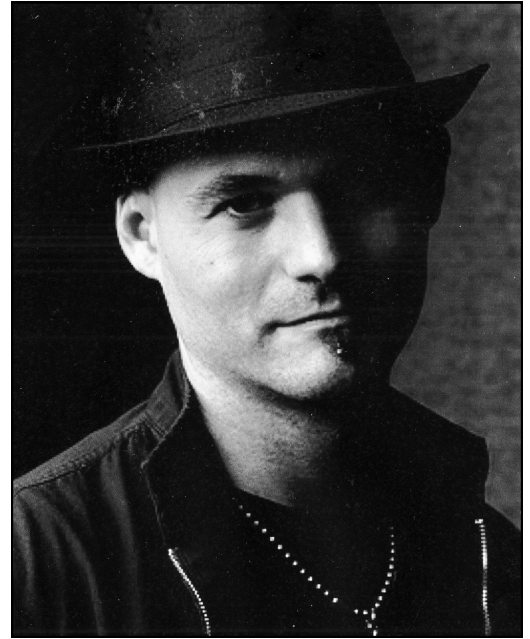
***Do some more research on the conspiracy theories that are mentioned in YANKEE TAVERN. What are other theories that surround the events? Do you think that any of them are plausible? Discuss your findings with the class.***

# IN INTERVIEW WITH SEAN GRANEY, DIRECTOR

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## How did you get into directing?

It's a long story... I started as an actor in high school. I didn't see a lot of theater growing up. One summer my best friend from high school came back from doing community theater where he summered and was like "Theater is awesome!" So, we were like, well, let's try it. And then we just started a drama club at my school. I liked the community it created; I loved it. It provided a creative outlet for me. Theater made a lot of sense to me, granted we did crappy musicals, but it made so much sense. So I decided to go to school for it to study acting. I went to Emerson College, in Boston, Massachusetts, and it was great, but I realized I was a bad actor. So halfway through, I started being a playwright and I graduated with a degree in acting wanting to be a playwright. I wrote some plays and did them around Boston, but a lot of people didn't come, so I was like, I need to get out of Boston. I decided to move to Chicago to be a playwright. Chicago was great. There was a lot of theater going on. But, I worked at Starbucks, didn't make a lot of money and I worked the night shift so I didn't get to see a lot of great theater. I would sit in my room and write these really bad plays and realized I didn't want to be a playwright anymore. So I got a job as a house manager at a fairly large theater in town. I realized I should get a career in theater because I love it so much, but I couldn't [at the time] do anything creatively. Doing that for a season I met a lot of really great actors and other people and they taught me about Chicago theater and what companies to look for, what actors to know and what directors to know. I realized that it seemed pretty easy to start a theater company in Chicago. It seemed like you didn't need to always do great things; you just couldn't give up. So, I decided to start a company and convinced a couple of friends to do it with me— foolish men— and I decided I was going to direct all the shows. And I had little to no directing experience, but decided that this was it.



## What is your process like when you direct a show?

There are things that I keep doing over and over again, but every show is different. It depends on what kind of show you're directing, what theater you're working with, what actors you're working with. But I start by breaking it down, sort of my version of script work, and I have these formulas and I try to fit everything into a certain, rigid structure. I then go through and do blocking in my head— it doesn't always get to the stage— but I go through moment to moment and then I write down what I think the characters are going through. So I do all this work in a notebook and I bring that into rehearsal and I either try to follow it or I throw it away. I always start by creating the physical world; I block very quickly. I try to get to runs of shows very quickly and then go back

and do some more script work once we know how the shows lives and moves and we can see it four-dimensionally. Then we can talk more clearly about script work—practically rather than abstractly.

### **How has the process been going for YANKEE TAVERN?**

The Rep is a great, really supportive, amazing machine where things happen so quickly and everybody's really open. The actors in the company that I'm working with are fantastic and I'm really, really enjoying it.

### **YANKEE TAVERN talks a lot about conspiracy theories. Is there more to this play than just those theories?**

For sure. It would be really hard to make a play that just deals with conspiracy theories. To me it's about the relationships that occur on stage. The characters see that their relationships are threatened and they are desperately trying to hang on to these relationships and save these relationships with each other. I think it's real easy to see the play as having this sort of destructive world that is infringing upon these characters which makes them not trust each other and makes their relationship start to deteriorate. It was really interesting to me to see these people as the cause of what's going on outside... It's the idea that if we can be more honest in our relationships, if we can spend more time with the people we're involved with and be more open and understanding and trust each other more, then I think the world wouldn't be quite as messed up a place.

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### **What do you hope the audience will take away from this show?**

That's a really good question and I'm not always the best director to answer that. I work strongly within themes of shows and work real hard on a nice even flow on the show, but I don't necessarily say, I hope the audience is going to take away "this" from the show. My hope is that they take away this idea that we need to fight for our relationships and that they become interested in these conspiracy theories.

## **RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING**

Brain, Marshall. *How Conspiracy Theories Work*. How Stuff Works. 2009. The Discovery Chanel. 10 Nov 2009. <<http://people.howstuffworks.com/conspiracy-theory.htm>>.

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Montez, Noe. Steven Dietz. 26 Oct 2006. Indiana University at Bloomington. 11 Nov 2009. <<http://www.indiana.edu/~thtr/productions/dramaturgy/dracula/dietz.html>>.

The 9/11 Truth Movement. 911truth.org. 9 Dec 2009. 11 Nov 2009. <<http://www.911truth.org/>>.

# VISITING THE REP

The 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 the Electric Railway and 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 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 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.

For more information on our education programs and our productions,  
please visit our website at [www.milwaukeeerep.com](http://www.milwaukeeerep.com)

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***You need three things in the theatre – the play, the actors and the audience,  
and each must give something. – Kenneth Haigh***

Theater is described as a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the process: playwrights, directors, designers, technicians, actors and the audience. Plays require audiences to give a new life to performances through their careful attention and enthusiastic reactions. The audience has an active role to play and the actors rely on you to be respectful and attentive. Through your observation of sets, costumes, lighting and the work of the actors, you'll be better able to follow the story and enjoy its live presentation. You are important in the final performance and your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.