

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater Presents

# HAPPY NOW?

by Lucinda Coxon   October 20 - November 15, 2009   Quadracci Powerhouse Theater



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 **HAPPY NOW?**

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## SYNOPSIS by Zoe Cohen

HAPPY NOW? examines the trials and tribulations of a group of young professional parents in suburban London. With a fulfilling job, a caring husband and two children, Kitty "has it all." And yet, she still feels "unsteady," as if something were missing from her life. Between her dysfunctional friends, her exasperating parents and her ever-increasing workload, Kitty seems to have reached her limit. But when a baffling stranger enters her life, she begins to question herself in ways she never imagined she would. As Kitty and her peers struggle to redefine what it means to be adults, they must also reconsider what it means to be happy.

*"I'm everything to everyone. Sometimes I get excited at the thought of being nothing to someone for twenty minutes."*

- Kitty

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR by Kristin Crouch

Lucinda Coxon, 45, is a playwright and screenwriter. Coxon's plays have been staged on both sides of the Atlantic. Her other works include "Waiting at the Water's Edge," "Wishbones," "Three Glances," "The Ice Palace," "Nostalgia," "Vesuvius," "I Am Angela Brazil by Angela Brazil" and "The Shoemaker's Incredible Wife." She wrote the screenplays for "Spaghetti Slow," "The Heart of Me," "Lilacs," "Happy Now?" and "Wild Target" starring Bill Nighy, which is currently shooting in the United Kingdom. She has just finished work on "The Danish Girl," a screen adaptation of David Ebershoff's novel, and is currently writing a new play, "Persistent Illusions," for the National Theatre. She has a daughter and lives in north-west London.



## WHO'S WHO?

**Kitty** - The main character of the play. Kitty wants to improve her life, but finds it difficult to make it a priority.

**Michael** - A businessman. He leaves an imprint on Kitty as she analyzes his attempts at seducing her.

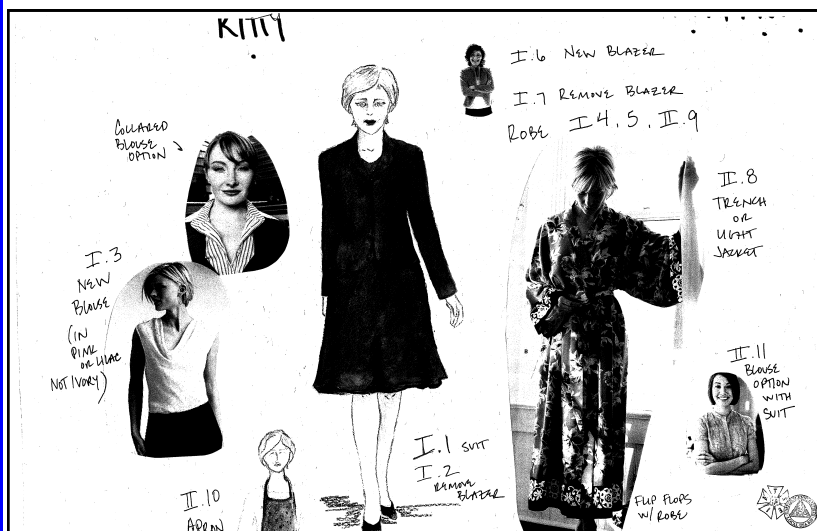
**Johnny** - Kitty's husband. He has recently become a public school teacher and is starting to view the world in a different light. Johnny is so laid back that he frustrates Kitty.

**Miles** - A good friend of Johnny. He excessively enjoys the good things in life. While Miles means well, he eventually widens the gap between Kitty and Johnny.

**Bea** - Miles' wife. She has similar tastes to Miles, but is able to control her desires. Bea realizes that her life isn't how she imagine and tries to regain control over herself.

**Carl** - Kitty's close, gay friend. Carl is a rock in Kitty's life and is able to help her with an objective point of view.

**June** - Kitty's mother. She often irritates Kitty with her complaining and negative mindset about her ill husband.



When designing a show, a costume designer goes through a long. After reading the play, the designer must come up with an initial rendering and do research of the time period, location, weather, character personalities and other factors that can affect what the character will wear. Here, the final rendering of Kitty is shown with the notes written and research done by the designer.

Rendering drawn by Rachel Laritz,  
Costume Designer for HAPPY NOW?

# AN INTERVIEW WITH JON JORY, DIRECTOR

## WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO DIRECTING *HAPPY NOW*??

One of the wonderful things about theater is that it teaches you about your own life. I don't know that theater teaches you how to live your life, but it teaches you how to understand your life. This is a play that did precisely that for me; it helped me understand my own life. It helps you understand the things, that in perspective you think you did pretty well, and the things you did terribly. This play is about how we treat other human beings in terms of what we need ourselves. Everybody who sees this play, from younger people to older people have made some mistakes in the way that they treat other people. So this is a good play to remind ourselves of our own humanity and it's a good play to assist us in understanding how important empathy is, i.e. to walk a mile in somebody else's shoes before you rank them out.



## THE PLAY REQUIRES A FAIRLY LARGE CAST AND MULTIPLE CHANGES IN SETTING. HOW DO YOU APPROACH STAGING IN SUCH A SITUATION?

We (directors) hope that we approach each play on its own terms. That's what we'd like to think we do and sometimes we actually do that. This is a play in which there are many, many scenes. I guess the popular term for this is cinematic. It's sort of like a movie; it moves quickly from one place to another. To do that we really didn't want to stop the play, move the couch and bring in the kitchen part. So what we're doing instead is having four extremely responsible young actors who do all of that. In this play, if you want a glass of orange juice, you just put your hand out and one of these actors puts a glass of orange juice in it, onstage. That way we don't have to have all the things you have in a kitchen. In a sense, it's unrealistic in that even while you are talking, the next scene is being set up. The idea of it is that it's built for speed, in other words you don't have to wait. When we finish the kitchen scene, there doesn't have to be a blackout with a music cue while you wait for 30 seconds for the next event to occur. It occurs, hopefully, within seconds. This is a way to move through the, I don't know, 24 scenes without the action ever stopping.

*"It's a good play to assist us in understanding how important empathy is, i.e. to walk a mile in somebody else's shoes before you rank them out."*

## I KNOW YOU ALREADY TALKED BRIEFLY ABOUT IT, BUT WHY IS *HAPPY NOW*? IMPORTANT? WHY DO YOU THINK LUCINDA COXON WROTE THE PLAY?

We talked a little bit about that already in the first question. One thing we should say about the play, and it's a play that men will certainly appreciate, is that it's funny, among other things, and it's ironic, but it is about a contemporary woman's experience. Her experience of her profession, her relationships, her marriage and how to, as they say, have it all without feeling that none of it is fulfilling. It's very simple. If I sent you nine tasks to do

in an hour, nine separate things to do, and any young person who is going to do homework in the evening will understand this, their experience of homework is Lucinda Coxon's experience of life. If I have so many things to do and I can't do any of them well, do I experience my life as fulfilling? So I think that's what she's talking about-- this feeling that many of us have had that life isn't fulfilling because we're doing too many things without the time to do any of them well.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK THE AUDIENCE IS GOING TO TAKE AWAY FROM THE SHOW?

I think, we hope, the audience will take away some of the things we've already talked about. The play, though there are parts of it that are quite bitter, is also extremely funny. So A) we hope the audience laughs, some of the time, and I think they will, and B) hopefully the audience will be fascinated with how we present the play. That's what you call its theatricality. And the play, in that sense, is very theatrical because of the way it moves and the fact that it is realistic situations presented in a completely unrealistic way. In the theater we're not only attempting to provide them with language, but you're seeing the event and we want what you're seeing to give you pleasure or make you interested or provide you something to think about. So I think it's comedy and it's visual nature of the play and, the third thing, this play will have wonderful acting parts. Good acting provides its own pleasure. Not every play is built around wonderful acting parts, but this one is. And we have wonderful actors giving first rate performances, so you can enjoy the art of acting in this play; it provides a wonderful canvas for it.

# UNHAPPILY EVER AFTER by Zoe Cohen

Seeing as *HAPPY NOW?* is essentially a play about unhappy adults, it may seem strange that fairy tales should be featured as such a prominent theme. It may be because in this play, failed expectations are at the root of all unhappiness, and fairy tales are one place that, as children, we develop expectations for what life should be like.

Fairy tales, in their modern incarnation, often portray a moral world, in which everyone gets exactly what they deserve. They provide powerful formative ideas about how to achieve happiness, often sticking to a pretty standard outline: there are trials and tribulations, but the good guy perseveres, and is eventually rewarded with the happy ending he has earned. Fairy tales represent everything the adult characters of *HAPPY NOW?* wish their lives could be, and what they were led to believe they *would* be: simple, spotless, and happy.

They all seem to all be wondering why they are living something short of happily ever after. Kitty is overworked and underappreciated. Teaching isn't the altruistic utopia Johnny imagined it would be. Carl's epic romance has fallen short. It turns out that Bea and Miles' "joint project" is really only Bea's project after all, both in terms of their kitchen remodeling, and in terms of their marriage. Fairy tale-style happiness eludes them all, and so they must find some other model of happiness. This may be more challenging than it appears. The play revolves around this challenge. Fairy tale-style happiness eludes them all, and so they must find some other model of happiness. This may be more challenging than it appears. The play revolves around this challenge.

Other examples of "modern day fairy tales," are also discussed in the play. By "modern day fairy tales" I mean contemporary things that give us unrealistic expectations of what our lives should be like, and what should make us happy. Miles comments on "All these magazines women read that give them ludicrous expectations of themselves" and the magazines *men* read that "give them ludicrous expectations of women" (86). Similarly, pop stars or famous athletes might make us feel that we have to look or act a certain way to be happy. Like fairy tales, these sources can fill us with impossible expectations, leaving us as unhappily ever after as the characters in the *HAPPY NOW?*.

**Activity:** Can you think of other examples of "modern day fairy tales" from your own life? What kinds of messages do they send? Find images of these examples (such as the *People Magazine* cover) and create a collage showing what you have discovered.

**Question:** What were your favorite fairy tales growing up? Did they follow the "standard outline" given above? If so, how? If not, how did they differ? Write down some ideas and share them with a small group.

**Question:** What is happiness to you? Do you think your definition of happiness changes as you get older? How so? How will you define happiness in one year? Five years? Ten years? Discuss these questions as a class.



## VOCABULARY

### Apprised – informed of

MICHAEL: I'm the grateful one. You're supposed to be... **apprised** of the facts. That's all.

### Sadsack – slang for an inept person

MICHAEL: You start to think: I wonder if that **sadsack** guy still wants to be nice to me.

### Feral – to exist in a natural state; not domesticated

KITTY: I tell you, if I ever left for more than a day they'd go **feral**.

### Collude – to act together through a secret understanding

CARL: You should refuse to **collude** with it.

### Dissipation – immoral way of living

JOHNNY: It's just annoying you live this life of almost complete **dissipation** and you look like you've just stepped off a yacht.

### Incontrovertible – not open to question or dispute

JOHNNY: I'm going to say it because I have to say one true **incontrovertible** thing before I leave.

### Other words to look up:

Unpalatable  
Bigamy

Opportunist  
Indiscriminate

Contrive  
Conversant

Arduous  
Contingency

Toerags  
Tribunal

Gaffe  
Superficial



# AMERICAN VERSUS ENGLISH CULTURE

## Language

There are many different varieties of English, but American and British English are the most common. While there is no “correct” version there are differences between the two. Below are a few ways that American English differs from British English.

**Vocabulary:** In America, sometimes two different words have the same meaning (bubble versus water fountain). The same can be true when comparing American and British words. Here are some examples (American - British):

Biscuits - Scones	Cookie - Biscuit	Jelly - Jam
Potato Chips - Crisps	French Fries - Chips	Baked Potato - Jacket Potato
Sweater - Jumper	Jumper - Sleeveless	Dress Pants - Trousers
Gas - Petrol	Trunk - Boot	Parking Lot - Car Park
Apartment - Flat	Elevator - Lift	Faucet - Tap
Diaper - Nappy	Stroller - Push Chair	Pacifier - Dummy



**Past Tense:** In America, when we want to make a word past tense we often add -ed to the end of the word. For example, burn would become burned; smell would become smelled. However, in England, they use the irregular form by adding a -t to the end. So, burn would become burnt and smell would be smelt.

**Spelling:** There are some general differences between British and American spellings. Words ending in -or and -ize in America tend to end in -our and -ise in England. Some examples are color versus colour, flavor versus flavour, recognize versus recognise and patronize versus patronise.

**Activity:** Find more words in American English that are different from those in British English. Using the information above and whatever other words you find, try to use British English words for a day. Is it difficult to do? How do others react? Discuss your observations with a small group.

## Schooling

In both countries, school is free of charge and mandatory; however, the school system in England is quite different than that in America. America enrolls students ages five to eighteen and then divides them into elementary, middle and high school. There are approximately 76 million students enrolled in public education with 85% receiving their high school diploma. There are five subjects that are studied throughout a student's education: science, math, English, social studies and physical education. As students progress to middle and high school, there are many electives that they can take including fine arts, foreign language, technology education and computers. After legislation was put into place, a strong emphasis on reading and math took place, which is primarily measured by standardized tests.

In England, students ages five to sixteen are enrolled, divided between first school, middle school and upper school (equivalent to our elementary, middle and high school respectively). There are about 11 million students enrolled with approximately 50% receiving their secondary diploma. Students may continue their secondary studies for two more years and would attend a sixth form college (a more advanced upper school). These extra two years would give you better qualifications for jobs, but would not give you an undergraduate degree. Not only are students divided up into schools, but also stages: Key Stage One is five and six year olds; Key Stage Two is seven through ten year olds; Key Stage Three is 11 through 13 year olds and Key Stage Four is 14 and 15 year olds. Key Stage One and Two fits into first school, Key Stage Three fits into middle school and Key Stage Four fits into upper school. The curriculum is organized around these stages and focuses on English, math and science. Along with these, other subjects, including art, history, geography, music, physical education and foreign languages, are mandatory in at least one key stage. Standardized testing also takes place and is valued, but is not the primary measure of student achievement.

**Activity:** Find some more information on the American and British education systems. Which education system sounds better to you? Why? Do you think that the American schools should adapt policies of the British schools or vice versa? Discuss your answers with your classmates.

## Marriage

In the United States, marriage rates have been slightly decreasing over time. In 2000, approximately 2,329,000 people were married in the US. That number decreased to 2,160,000 in 2006. Since 1970 the marriage rate has dropped by about 33% and almost 50% of all marriages have involved a remarriage of one or both spouses. The divorce rate in the US rose nearly two and a half times since 1960, but has recently leveled off. In 2006, nearly 50% of all marriages ended in divorce. Many people believe the US has such a high divorce rate because of pre-marriage co-habitation, lack of interest in religion and differing morals and beliefs.

In England, marriage rates have also been decreasing over time. In 2006, there were 239,454, which was down from 267,961 marriages in 2000. There has been nearly a 50% decrease in marriages since 1970; a much higher decrease than in the US. Unlike America, the divorce rate in England has also been slowly decreasing over the years. There were only 132,562 divorces in 2006, almost 10,000 less than 2000. While England's divorce rate has been dropping over the years, its divorce rate compared to the population and number of marriages was actually higher than the US by about 5% in 2006.

**Question:** *Why do you think there are the differences in the marriage and divorce rates in America and England? What factors play into divorces? Do you think that the idea of marriage is not as important today as it used to be? Why? Write down some ideas and share them with a small group.*

**Activity:** *Do some more research on the differences between American and English cultures. What else do you find? Are there any things that you might like America to adopt? Discuss your findings with your class. Things to possibly research: government, food or sports.*

## DEVELOPMENT IN ADULTS by Zoe Cohen

The study of adult development is a relatively young field. Until the early 1950's, psychologists who studied "human development" tended to focus solely on childhood development. Psychologist Eric Erikson was one of the first to look more closely at the changes we go through *after* childhood. The characters of HAPPY NOW? all seem stuck, like they could use a little development. Erikson's theory is a useful tool for understanding how and why they are stuck, and just how they might move past this.

Erikson theorized that over the course of a human life, there are eight stages. Although there is an age range assigned to each stage, they are not concretely fixed in time, and there is often overlap between stages. Each stage is representative of what Erikson called a "psychosocial crisis" or, an internal struggle that results in change or growth. Here's where it gets a little complicated. Each crisis stage has two corresponding words. These words are opposites, and they represent the two most extreme possible outcomes of the stage. To successfully pass through a crisis stage we must strike a balance between these two extreme outcomes. If we pass through a stage unsuccessfully, we develop habits associated with one of the two extremes. Let's look at the infancy stage as an example. The two opposing words for this stage are

ERIKSON'S EIGHT PSYCHOSOCIAL CRISIS STAGES		
Psychosocial Crisis Stage	Life Stage	Age Range
Trust v. Mistrust	Infancy	0 - 1 ½ years
Autonomy v. Shame and Doubt	Early Childhood	1 - 3 years
Initiative v. Guilt	Play Age	3 - 6 years
Industry v. Inferiority	School Age	5 - 12 years
Identity v. Role Confusion	Adolescence	9 - 18 years
Intimacy v. Isolation	Young Adult	18 - 40 years
Generativity v. Stagnation	Adulthood	30 - 65 years
Integrity v. Despair	Mature Age	50 +

trust and mistrust. If you passed through the stage unsuccessfully and learned to be too trusting as a baby, you might be a very gullible toddler. If you learned to be too mistrustful, you might be overly guarded and suspicious. If you passed through the stage successfully you would have a reasonable sense of when to be trusting, and when to be skeptical.

There are two stages that the characters of *HAPPY NOW?*, all in their late thirties, would most likely fit into. The sixth stage, which applies to anyone ages 18 to 40, is a conflict between intimacy and isolation. Intimacy means a willingness to enter personal relationships, and isolation means an unwillingness to do so. Too much intimacy results in promiscuity, or engaging in relationships with too many people. Too much isolation leads to exclusivity, or an unwillingness to connect with anyone. A balance between the two would result in the ability to form an appropriate number of genuine relationships, with a focus on reciprocity, or give and take. This is something the characters of *HAPPY NOW?* struggle with. Miles isolates himself from Bea with his cruel jokes, sabotaging any intimacy that may develop between them. His abuse of alcohol also isolates him from his wife and his friends, preventing him from really connecting with anyone.



The seventh stage may tell us more about the imbalance in Johnny and Kitty's marriage. This stage has an age range of 30 to 60, and the central conflict is between generativity and stagnation. Generativity comes from the word "generation" and usually refers to the production and rearing of children with selflessness and dedication. Too much generativity results in overextension, or doing too much for too many other people. Stagnation, the opposing word, refers to a lack of interest in helping others. The word Erikson uses for too much stagnation, is reactivity, but a less confusing word might be selfishness. A balance between the two results in unconditional care for one's children, or some other selfless work, but without neglecting oneself or one's other duties. Johnny is overextended; he spends so much time working to "save the children" as a schoolteacher, that he sometimes neglects his own, and his family's needs. Kitty is also overextended, commenting: "I'm everything to everyone. Sometimes I get excited at the thought of being nothing to someone for twenty minutes" (114). Between running their home and taking on extra work for her ailing boss, she is left with no time for herself. The characters of this play are stuck. They don't know how to move forward so that they might finally be "happy now!" This is precisely why Erikson's system is helpful, not only for examining characters from plays, but for understanding the people in our own lives, and indeed ourselves. It provides a starting place to study our own attitudes and behaviors, and lends us the tools we need to begin making changes. Only then can we continue successfully on the path of growth and development.

**Question: Do you see yourself, at any age, fitting into one or more of Erikson's crisis stages? What about friends or family? Write down your ideas and share them with a small group.**

**Question: Do you think Erikson's system is helpful? Why or why not? Do you think that everyone falls into these stages sometimes in their lives? Do you think people repeat stages? Explain your answers to your class.**

## RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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# 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.

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**The Rep Milwaukee**  
THEATER ♦ TRAINING AT ITS BEST

*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.