

DISGRACED

Written by **Ayad Akhtar** | Directed by **Marcela Lorca**
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This Teacher's Guide is designed to be used in the classroom along with The Rep's Play Guide for *Disgraced*. These are some suggested activities for your classroom. The Play Guide is available online at <https://www.milwaukeekeerep.com/Tickets--Events/201617-Season/Disgraced/Disgraced-PlayGuide/>

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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SUGGESTED TEACHING & LEARNING TOPICS

Classroom activity topics include:

- 1.) Cultural Identity
- 2.) Legal and Social Justice
- 3.) Symbolism in Visual Art
- 4.) The Dinner Party Scenario

CULTURAL IDENTITY

See the Play Guide for social-historical context of *Disgraced*

DISCUSS: Pre-Show Questions

- What does the term "cultural identity" mean to you?
- Think about the different generations in your family (parents, grandparents, cousins, siblings). Do you notice any similarities or differences in the values of the different generations?
- Discuss the difference between cultural radicalism and cultural pride. Compare and contrast the two.
- Discuss the term assimilation. What are the advantages and disadvantages of assimilation? When someone moves to a new country, what are ways that they can still practice their culture?

DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- Discuss each character's traits (personality, specific beliefs, social status, profession). Is there any character that you related to the most? Why did you see yourself in that character?
- Amir defines himself as an apostate (a person who renounces a religious or political belief). The remaining characters seem to have an opinion on Amir's rejection of his faith. Is it fair to have a comment on a culture that you have not personally practiced? Why or why not?
- Discuss the challenges present when going against your parents' core beliefs (sexuality, religion, profession, education). To what extent does family know best? To what extent do you know what's best for you? Discuss the differences in Abe and Amir's beliefs and how they either followed or strayed from their family's core beliefs. How did the characters show empathy or respect for each other despite opposing cultural beliefs?



*Bhavesh Patel (Amir) and Austene Van (Jory) in Disgraced at the Guthrie Theatre.
Photo by Dan Norman.*

**"Yeah...I forgot...
which we I was."**
-Amir

ACTIVITY: CROSS THE LINE

Have students line up shoulder to shoulder at one end of the room. Explain to them that for this exercise they should remain silent and focused on themselves. Call out different scenarios: if the students have experienced this, they take a step forward. If they haven't, they remain in the spot where they are. You can do as many scenarios as you like. (Feel free to make up your own, or look at the examples below). At the end of the game, the students should stay in their spaces and look around.

- If you've ever felt disrespected
- If you've ever felt proud of a school assignment you completed
- If you told a lie in order to protect someone's feelings from getting hurt
- If you've laughed so hard that you've cried

- If you've ever kept a secret from your parents
- If you've felt lonely
- If you trust your best friend
- If you have ever got your heart broken

DISCUSS: Were you surprised at the number of people who took a step forward on any of the questions? Why or why not? What conclusions can we make about our shared experiences? Did any of the questions spark a particular emotion? How does an activity like this bring us closer together as a group or ensemble?

LEGAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

DISCUSS: Pre-Show Questions

- How do we define legal justice? How is legal justice different from social justice?
- Brainstorm any modern or historical examples of these two concepts. Discuss how legal justice and social justice has changed and adapted throughout history. (*Making a Murderer*, legalizing gay marriage, *Orange Is the New Black*, peaceful protests [Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr], 19th Amendment [women's right to vote], Barack Obama as our first African American President, Dakota Access Pipeline protests)
- Why, historically, do social justice and legal justice conflict? How do you think these two social concepts could eventually work in harmony?

"I mean, why would you have worked in the public defender's if you didn't care about justice?"

-Emily

DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- Why was it controversial for Amir to attend the trial? Why was he hesitant to go? Why were Emily and Abe so persistent that he attend?
- Discuss the scene to the right. Give examples of what "justice" looks like and what "order" looks like. Which characters would choose which, and why? Cite specific evidence from the show.
- Which characters would side with social justice, and which with legal justice? When can social and legal justice come together? What needs to be done to ensure the two work together in partnership? Give examples from the play to support your answer.
- Theater is about showing real, complex people and stories on stage. From a social justice standpoint, do you think this play was successful? Does it give a voice or insight to any specific community? Why might this play be viewed as controversial?

ISAAC: I'm married to a woman who has a Kissinger quote above her desk in the den...

JORY: 'If forced with choosing justice or order, I'll always choose order.'

EMILY: Why do you have that above your desk?

JORY: To remind me. Not to get lost in the feeling that I need to get justice. You pull yourself out of the ghetto, you realize real soon, order is where it's at...

ACTIVITY: MANNEQUIN CHALLENGE

Discuss the art of tableau and the way we use it in the theater. For this exercise, have the class split into small groups to perform a Mannequin Challenge. Give each group of students one of the themes below, and without talking, have them assemble a stage picture around the room within ten seconds. Record the tableaux for playback. If there's time, add music to the video.

Tableau: a group of models or motionless figures representing a scene from a story or from history.

JUSTICE | HUMAN RIGHTS | LAW AND ORDER | OPPRESSION

DISCUSS: How did you feel about the themes being so open-ended? Did this make the challenge more difficult? What were some characters you found yourself portraying in this challenge? Discuss which category developed the best story through tableau and why.

SYMBOLISM IN VISUAL ART

See page 11 of the Play Guide for art referenced in *Disgraced*

DISCUSS: Pre-Show Questions

- Brainstorm visual artists and their work. What stories do they tell? What design or artistic elements bring their stories to life?
- Define symbolism. How is symbolism used in visual art? How is symbolism used in the theater? How do these uses compare to one another?
- How can a famous painting represent a culture? Brainstorm ways a work of visual art could do a culture justice or create a negative stereotype.

"Islam is rich and universal. Part of a spiritual and artistic heritage we can all draw from."

-Isaac



Bhavesh Patel (Amir) and Caroline Kaplan (Emily) in *Disgraced* at the Guthrie Theatre. Photo by Dan Norman.

DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- Compare the opening and closing stage directions on the right. What do these paintings symbolize? Why do you think the playwright chose these two contrasting set and prop designs to bookend this story? How can props or set design help to fuel the emotions shown on stage?
- Emily had an attachment to Islamic Art. Discuss how her cultural fascination either positively or negatively impacted Amir.

ACTIVITY: SCULPTURE GARDEN

Have the students pair off in groups of two. Have one student choose to be the artist and one choose to be the sculpture. The artist will “sculpt” their sculpture. Each pair receives a line of dialogue from the show that will inspire their sculpture. Encourage them to not show the line literally, but think abstractly. Be specific! Think about the positioning of the wrist, of the knees, of the face. After time is up, have the students take a walk around the Sculpture Garden. If there’s time, have the students switch roles and give them a new line.

- “I’m not one of his own people.” - Amir

- (The first blow unleashes a torrent of rage, overtaking him) Pg. 44

- “I had a part in what happened.” - Emily

- “Just because I’m telling you the truth doesn’t mean I’m not showing you respect.” - Abe

- “I don’t understand what you see in it.” - Amir

- “It’s not always what people think.” - Emily

Opening Stage Directions

“The stage left wall is covered with a large painting: a vibrant, two-paneled image in luscious whites and blues, with patterns reminiscent on an Islamic garden.”

Closing Stage Directions

“The paintings above the mantle are gone. Along one wall, a partially wrapped canvas is leaned. It is turned away from the audience.”

DISCUSS: How did it feel to abstractly embody these lines? Did the lines help your creative ideas or inhibit them? Which did you like more, being the artist or the sculpture?

THE DINNER PARTY SCENARIO

DISCUSS: Pre-Show Questions

- *Disgraced* brings characters from vastly different cultures, political, and religious backgrounds to the same table for dinner during the rising action of the show. Why do you think the playwright chose a dinner party as the setting?
- What effect does the setting have on the plot, particularly the climax?
- Predict what could happen during this dinner party with these four unique characters sharing a meal.

“That firm will never be ours. It’s theirs. And they’re always going to remind us that we’re just invited to the party.”

-Amir

DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- Did you expect the series of events that happened over dinner? How mistaken or correct were your predictions?
- Do you think there was a proper emotional build up to the violence scene? Why do you think that Ayad Akhtar included this scene in his play? Why not have the violence occur between Amir and Isaac? Or Amir and Jory?
- In the very last scene, Emily says she doesn’t hate Amir and that she “had a part in this too.” Discuss this quote. If she did have a “part in this”, in what specific way did she provoke Amir’s actions?

ACTIVITY: TAKE A WALK IN MY SHOES

Have the students separate into pairs. Each pair will choose which partner will be the Walker and which partner will be the Observer. The Walkers should take a walk around the room, just as they normally would. The Observers will watch the specificities of their partner’s walk. Do they hold tension in their shoulders? Do they lean forward when they walk? What facial expression are they making? How is their pace – fast or slow? Then, the Observers will stand up and walk behind the Walker, replicating the Walker’s movements. Next, with the Observers still following the Walker, call out some scenarios below (or come up with your own) and see how that affects their walks. Then, have the groups switch and The Walkers will observe and The Observers will now lead the walking!

- In an Art Museum

- Through the crowded streets of New York City

- Trying to avoid someone you don’t like

- Walking home from school after a long, stressful day

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Did you have a preference on Walking or Observing? Why did you prefer one to the other? What was difficult about walking like another person? How did changing your physicality affect your emotional state? What differences did you notice in your partner’s walk when the scenarios were added? By walking like them, what new information did you learn about your partner?

WRAP-UP EXERCISE: Release Circle

Invite the students to stand in a circle. Each person goes around the circle and says one thing that is frustrating them that day (this can be broad and universal like "racism" "sexism" or specific and individual like "I missed the bus this morning" or "I got a bad grade on an exam"). As a class, agree on what the frustration affirmation will be (some examples are "Screw It", "Release It", "Bye, Felicia"). The entire class will repeat this phrase together after every frustration. Feel free to go around the circle as many times as necessary.

Or, alternatively, if you feel your students need a pick me up after one round of frustrations you can have everyone say a positive experience that happened that day and everyone can say a positive affirmation (ex: "You're awesome!", "Boo Yah", or clapping).

This exercise allows students to release any tension the show or the show's themes might have triggered by voicing their opinions in a safe and orderly manner.

OTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- What does it mean to be an American in 2016?
- What are the qualities that make up a healthy relationship?
- How do our professions shape our personal experiences or identities? Each couple in this show is made up of an artist and a lawyer. Compare and contrast the two professions.
- What are ways that we, as humans, resort to primal instincts during times of stress?

If there's time...

ACTIVITY: PARTY QUIRKS

Give the scene a title that follows the themes of *Disgraced* (some examples are Empowered, Intelligence, Strength, Condescending, Determination). Have one student be the host of the party. The host leaves the room while the rest of the class (the audience) decides what quirks their guests have. There should be 3-5 guests coming to the party and their quirks should exist within the world of the chosen title. The game works best when the quirks are as detailed as possible! When the host comes back into the room, the guests should enter the dinner party one by one, engaging in brief improv dialogue with the host to give them clues to what their quirk is. The round is complete when the host has correctly guessed what each quirk is! Feel free to play multiple rounds!



Kevin Isola (Isaac), Caroline Kaplan (Emily), Austene Van (Jory), and Bhavesh Patel (Amir) in *Disgraced* at the Guthrie Theatre. Photo by Dan Norman.



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Common Core State Standards:

English Language Arts

RL.6-10.1 LITERACY COMPREHENSION
RL.6-12.3 ANALYZE DIALOGUE
SL.8-12.1 COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSIONS
SL.8-12.3 POINT OF VIEW
SL.6-12.4 PRESENTATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS
L.8-12.5 FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

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