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THE NIGHT IS A CHILD

by Charles Randolph-Wright
March 12 – April 13, 2008
A Study Guide for Students and Educators

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 *The Night is a Child.*

If you would like to schedule a classroom workshop, or if we can help in any other way, please contact:
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Synopsis

Harriet Easton, a Boston suburban housewife now in her 50s, has just arrived in Rio de Janeiro. She meets Bia, a native Brazilian. Harriet tells Bia how she wants to find the café where the song "The Girl from Ipanema" was written. She has walked to the beach by herself from her hotel in Copacabana. Bia recommends a nearby hotel and leaves before Harriet can thank her.

Harriet enters the Ipanema Plaza Hotel and meets Joel, the owner. Harriet says she is from Boston, which provokes an odd reaction from Joel. He "accidentally" deletes someone's room reservation to make room for Harriet, saying that she must have a beautiful room while in Rio.

Back in Boston, Harriet's children, Brian and Jane, are attempting to find some way to locate Harriet, who did not tell them that she was leaving. Brian is angry that Jane and her husband Todd are trying to rush Harriet's recovery.

A child's voice sounds, and Harriet begins to have a flashback. She hears voices in her head and wonders why they haven't stopped.

The following scene cuts back and forth between Harriet in Brazil and her children in Boston. Harriet sees Bia again, and talks about how music drew her to Brazil. She has another flashback, seeing the image of her dead son, Michael, who helped her learn Portuguese. Brian is alone at a bar cursing Michael, who he blames for ruining his family. Brian and Michael were identical twins, and Brian is angry that he is constantly mistaken for his brother. He tells the bartender that he has no kids because he has "bad genes." The bartender gives him coffee to sober him up. Simultaneously, Harriet tries a cup of strong Brazilian coffee. Jane picks up Brian, who is too drunk to drive home.

Todd and Jane try to figure out what to do with Brian, whose drinking has become a burden on them. A drunken Brian sings Harriet's favorite song, *Mais Que Nada*. Jane and Brian finally realize where Harriet has gone.

An image of Michael wakes Harriet. She remembers Jane talking about her childhood friend Pamela ignoring her in the grocery store. Jane describes seeing a picture of Pam's dead daughter in the newspaper. She says that she is trying to forget that Michael was her brother.

Joel knocks on the door, startling Harriet out of her visions. He has arranged a tour for her. Harriet expresses a desire to see a Candomblé ritual, a type of Brazilian religious ceremony. Joel refuses to help her attend.

In the street, Harriet runs into Bia. Bia reveals that she has been to Boston, since she went to Harvard medical school. She begins dancing to distant samba music, but Harriet refuses to dance with her. Michael appears again and encourages Harriet to continue practicing her Portuguese. Two men steal Harriet's purse. Bia watches, but makes no move to help her.

Some time later, Brian and Jane sit in the airport, waiting to board a plane to Rio. Simultaneously, Harriet sits in the Rio airport waiting to return home. Bia rushes into the airport and tells her not to leave. "You have not done what you came here to do," she says. Harriet reveals the secret that has been plaguing her family throughout the play: that the year before, her son Michael walked into a nursery and killed nine people before killing himself. Bia holds her hand and gently begins teaching her to samba. In Boston, Brian and Jane confess to each other their hatred for Michael.

Brian and Jane arrive at the Rio airport and begin looking for Henrique, a detective they have hired to help them find Harriet. Henrique approaches and offers to take them to the hotel where Harriet is staying.

Bia and Harriet share a taxi on their way to a Candomblé ceremony. Bia asks why Harriet is so interested in the religion. Harriet replies that being near the Candomblé priests triggers visions of her son.

Henrique drops Brain and Jane off at Harriet's hotel. Jane wants to sit in the lobby until her mother returns, but Brian convinces her to walk on the beach with him.

Bia drops Harriet off at the Candomblé house, saying that she cannot come inside. Harriet enters and the ritual begins, triggering another vision of Michael. He tells her to return home, to where she is needed. Harriet tries to ask Michael why he did it, but is ignored as he reenacts the massacre in front of her horrified eyes. She flees back to the beach, collapsing in Bia's arms.

Later that night, Harriet returns to the hotel to find her children waiting for her. They demand an explanation for her disappearance. She explains that she didn't want to be around for the anniversary of Michael's death, to see the images of the people he had killed. All three admit that they have avoided dealing with the tragedy. Harriet agrees to come home after she has taken Brian and Jane on a tour of Rio.

The following day, as they prepare to leave the hotel, Harriet asks Joel to look up Bia's number so that she can say goodbye. Joel, furious, thinks she is joking. He reveals that Bia, his sister, was killed in Boston the year before. He demands that they leave his hotel. Harriet is shocked at first, then tells Joel to let his sister go. She exits as Joel breaks down.

Back in Boston, Harriet makes an offering to Yemenja, the Candomblé goddess of the sea. Bia appears to bid her farewell, saying that Joel has finally accepted her death and let her go. She urges Harriet to let Michael go as well. Harriet finally says goodbye to her son, and begins dancing the samba as the curtain falls.

About the Author: Charles Randolph-Wright

A native of York, South Carolina, Charles is an honor graduate of Duke University where he was an A.B. Duke Scholar. He subsequently studied acting with the Royal Shakespeare Company in London and dance with the Alvin Ailey School in New York City. From there, Charles has built a dynamic and diversified career in directing, writing and producing for theatre, television and film.

"I want to present new stories or old stories in new ways so that even if I don't change the world, I may have an impact on those that do," says Randolph-Wright, "That's the kind of arrogance I grew up with."

Originally a pre-med major, Randolph-Wright nonetheless found himself drawn to the performing arts. He eventually graduated with three majors: pre-med, theater and religion. He went on to great success in many different arenas. He was part of the original Broadway cast of *Dreamgirls* and a member of a disco group that garnered three gold records. He recently wrote and directed the film *Mama I Want To Sing,* which premieres later this year. He was a producer and writer of the critically acclaimed Showtime series *Linc's.* He directed a hit revival of *Guys and Dolls,* which was selected by the estate of Frank Loesser (the show's composer and lyricist) to become a national tour celebrating the musical's 50th anniversary. Its cast album was nominated for a Grammy.

"Agents kept telling me to concentrate on one thing," Wright says. "Don't let people in show business know you can do a bunch of different things. It confuses them and they don't know what to do with you. But I resisted."

Milwaukee Repertory Theater's production of *The Night is a Child* will be the world premiere of the play. "I wanted to premiere this play in a place that also has a collision of cultures," Wright says, "a city that understands the mixtures of various worlds." He says he was inspired to write the play while visiting Brazil on the anniversary of the Columbine school shooting.

"Brazil is where I go to escape, where I go to breathe," he writes. "When my plane lands, I immediately exhale. Magic and beauty permeate that country -- the people, the music, the food, the religion, the sports, the dance. It is an extraordinary world. We make in a week what some people there earn in a lifetime, yet they are infinitely happier. You see it. You feel it. I love juxtapositions, the collisions of cultures. The idea of a middle-aged woman from a suburb of Boston exploring Brazil provided an opportunity for me to play with all kinds of themes -- social, political, racial and religious."

Brazilian Terms and Phrases

The following are some Brazilian and Portugese terms taken from the play and their definitions.

Boa tarde – Good afternoon.

Brasileira – A Brazilian woman.

Caipirinha – Brazil's national cocktail, made of cachaça, sugar, lime and ice.

Candomblé – A religion based on African traditions with elements derived from Christianity, practiced chiefly in Brazil.

Claro – Clearly.

De nada – You're welcome.

Desculpe – Excuse me.

Dirige mais devagar – Drive more slowly.

Fala Português? – Do you speak Portuguese?

Feijoada – A Brazilian dish, made with beans, beef and pork.

Ipanema – A district of Rio, known for its elegance and beautiful beach.

Mais que nada – No worries; literally, 'more than nothing.'

Muito bom – Very good.

Muito prazer – Pleasure to meet you.

Obrigado – Thank you; or 'I am indebted to you.'

Orixá – A god or goddess of Candomblé, each representing a force of nature.

Preciso informação – I need information.

Sacana! – Bastard!

Saúde! – Greetings!

Também – Also.

Tudo bem – It's all good.

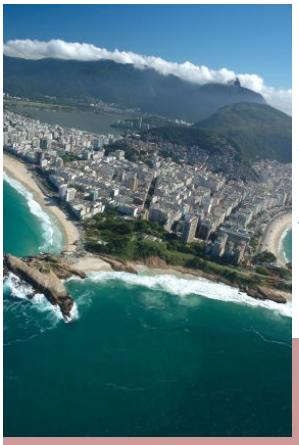
Um pouco – A little.

Voce fala bem – You speak well.

Background on Brazil and Candomblé

Brazil

Brazil, in South America is the fifth largest country in the world, slightly smaller than the United States. It is also the fifth most populous (at approximately 184 million people), and has one of the ten largest economies worldwide. The climate is mostly tropical, and is characterized by its beautiful beaches; population density drops sharply as you move inland. Brazil declared its independence from Portugal in 1822, but Portuguese remains the official language. It was the last Western country to abolish slavery, in 1888. The population is highly diverse, owing to the slave trade and the mass immigration of laborers after the abolition of slavery.



Rio de Janeiro

The second largest city in Brazil, Rio de Janeiro ("River of January") was for many years the capital of Brazil. Rio is famous for its beautiful beaches, including Ipanema and Copacabana, its diversity of cultures, and its Carnival celebrations. Rio is also one of Brazil's most dangerous cities: the city is plagued by a high murder rate and frequent outbreaks of gang violence. This is due in part to the enormous economic disparity within the city; a great number of Rio's inhabitants live in poverty, and oftentimes wealthy neighborhoods are surrounded on all sides by slums, leading to class-based racism and violence.

Carnival

Carnival (or Carnaval in Portugese) is an annual Brazilian festival celebrated for one week prior to the beginning of Lent. The celebration dates back to the ancient Roman celebration of Bacchinalia (spring festivals in honor of Bacchus, Roman god of wine). The name of the festival comes from the Latin term "Carne Vale" meaning "Farewell to the Flesh," as the festival itself is intended to be a final blowout before 40 days of Lenten abstinence and fasting.

Today, Carnival is called the "greatest party on earth." It is a week-long celebration characterized by elaborate costumes, parades and endless music and dancing.

Christ the Redeemer

The statue that Harriet mentions in the play is the famous *Christ the Redeemer,* a 130-foot monument which overlooks the city of Rio de Janeiro from the peak of the nearby Corcovado mountain. The idea of building a monument atop the mountain was first proposed in 1859 by Pedro Maria Boss, a Catholic priest. He was struck by the mountain's beauty and requested funds to build a religious statue in honor of the Brazilian Princess Isabel. The government refused to fund a religious project, however, so the idea was dropped until 1921, when the church organized its own fundraising campaign for the project.

Construction of the statue took nine years and cost $250,000 (approximately $2.5 million in today's currency). The monument officially opened on October 12, 1931, and has become a popular tourist destination and an important icon for Brazilians.

Candomblé

Candomblé is a religion based on African beliefs which is particularly popular in Brazil. The religion was originally brought to Brazil by slaves before the Revolutionary War. Candomblé draws heavily from the Yoruba religious tradition, incorporating dancing, drumming, animal sacrifice and the worship of orixás - deities which are thought of as aspects of (or children of) a higher, unknowable God. Many variations of Candomblé emerged as the religion migrated and people of different nations added aspects of their own traditions.

A typical Candomblé ceremony consist of two parts: a private preparation period and a public ceremony. During the preparation period, priests wash and iron the costumes for the ceremony, decorate the temple in honor of the orixás to be honored and prepare the offering. Each orixá has a favored offering, usually a very basic food such as beans, rice or popcorn. An animal may also be sacrificed; this is always done by the priests as part of the private ceremony, and the animal is prepared and then consumed by worshippers during the public ceremony. The public ceremony involves dancing, drumming, and songs celebrating the deeds of the chosen spirit, and culminates in a banquet in the orixá's honor.

Divination

In the play, Harriet attempts to find a pai-de-santo (father-of-saints, a male priest) to perform a divination for her. Divination, the idea of obtaining information by supernatural means, is an important aspect of Candomblé worship. Priests perform divination by throwing sixteen cowry shells *(pictured above).* The position the shells land in determines which orixá, or god, will speak through them to answer a given question. After the answer is provided, it is customary to make an offering to the orixá in recognition of their aid.

ORIXÁ	NATURAL ELEMENT	HUMAN FUNCTION	HUMAN QUALITY	COLOR	DAY	SYNCRETIC LINK
Exu	Fire	Communication	Messenger, Trickster	Red, Black	Monday, Friday	Satan
Ogum	Iron	Metallurgy, War	Violence, Virility	Dark Blue, Red	Tuesday	Saint Antonio
Oxóssi	Jungle	Hunting	Provider, Agility	Light Blue, Green	Thursday	Saint George
Obaluaiê	Earth	Medicine	Health and Sickness	Purple, Black, White	Tuesday	Saint Roque
Ossaim	Plants	Medicine	Health and Sickness	Green, White	Monday, Thursday, Saturday	Saint Benedict, Saint Roque
Oxumaré	Rainbow		Serpent, Continuity	Green, Yellow	Tuesday	Saint Bartholemew
Xangô	Lightning, Thunder	Justice	Vanity, Royalty, Wealth	Red, White	Wednesday	Saint Jerome, Saint Peter
Oxum	Sweet Water	Procreation	Fertility, Love, Vanity	Yellow	Saturday	Our Lady of the Candeias, of the Conception, and of the Appearance
Yemanjá	Sea Water	Procreation	Fertility, Maternity	Light Blue	Saturday	Our Lady of the Seamen, and of the Conception
Iansã	Wind, Tempest		Sensuality, Courage, Spontaneity	Red, Purple, Rose	Wednesday	Saint Barbara
Oxalá	Air	Creation	Creation of life, Patience, Wisdom	White	Friday	Christ, Our Lord of the Good End *(Bom Fim)*

Each orixá in the Candomblé religion is associated with an element, a human behavior and function, and a day of the week. Each also has a favored offering and color, which affects how they are worshipped; for example, for a ceremony in honor of Oxalá, worshippers dress in white and make an offering of unsalted rice. Due in part to religious persecution, aspects of Christianity have been incorporated into Candomblé as well, and each deity is associated with a specific Catholic saint.

A Brief Moment With Timothy Douglas, Director

Timothy Douglas is a veteran director and actor. The Night is a Child *is the second production he has directed for Milwaukee Repertory Theater, following last season's* Gem of the Ocean.

What is the rehearsal process like? Is there anything unique to this show that's different from other shows you've worked on?

The culture is different. The play is of course set in Brazil, in Rio, which is a culture I've never been in, and I've never studied. That dictated how I would approach the show. Specifically the ritual of Candomblé: it's a spiritual and religious practice that's sometimes mistaken for voodoo, which has a negative connotation. But according to all the research I've done, there's nothing negative about Candomblé. But I didn't know anything about that either. So Simone Ferro, our choreographer, was integral to this process: we've been able to draw on her experience both as a choreographer and as someone who's been to Brazil. So I've given a lot of time over to her. Through the specificity of her movements and the research I've done, I've started to intuitively understand the culture, and from that point on I'm really just trusting my gut, trusting the feedback from the playwright and the Brazilians in the room, Simone and Fabio Pires, our dialect coach. Bruno Irizarry, who plays Henrique, spends a lot of time in Brazil because his wife is from there. I've really benefited from and come to rely upon their feedback. Beyond that, like always, I just go with instinct. The truth is truth. The truth in the storytelling either connects with me or it doesn't.

You've worked with several of your designers before.

Tony Cisek is the only set designer I call. Some theatres want me to consider local designers, but he's designed almost everything I've done professionally. He took a vacation to Brazil right before I knew I was doing this play, so he had a lot to bring to it, particularly his enthusiasm. Michael Gilliam is a lighting designer who both Charles and I have worked with many times before, and it just so happens that he's recently returned from his vacation in Rio. So there are all these great alignments and coincidences that are benefitting the production. Tracy Dorman is someone I work with a lot. She's one of the smartest people I know in terms of clothing and culture and how it fits an actor, not just making them look pretty or appropriate, but how they move in it. Not all costume designers pay that kind of attention. The sound designer, Ray Nardelli, is new to me, but he's fantastic.

What do you want people to take away from the play?

Hopefully some understanding of approaching an impossible grieving process. We've been talking about the setting a lot, and the culture, but it's really about a family coming to terms with this horrific tragedy, and the aftermath of that. These days, most of us are bombarded almost weekly with these random, senseless shootings, and as a culture we've shut down. There was a time, not so long ago, where each of these events were really horrifying and inspired some soul-searching on a cultural level. Now it's just part of the status quo.

I think part of what this play is intended to do is to return us to that place where we're actually grappling with the situation and reflecting on it. And then, coming out the other side, after grieving, what are we going to do? What do we do individually, and what are we going to do collectively, to stop this insanity? I think the play's meant to inspire, to reawaken, to snap us out of our complacency towards these types of tragedies. Often it can help when you remove the act from its original context, which is why I think Charles set the play in Brazil. The audience is going to be on the journey before they realize what journey that they're actually on, and by that time they really do have to deal with it.

But the play doesn't answer those questions for us.

No, ultimately the play is saying there is no answer to "Why?" The shooter in Virginia Tech, and this other one at Northern Illinois University: there's never going to be an answer to "Why did they do it?" And that's the wrong question, we've realized. The question we should be asking is "What do we do?" How do we grieve over this and move on, to be able to function? And once we've figured out how to function, what do we do in order to make sure that we've put a stop to this? How do we take responsibility for this as a society and reach out and find these people before they get to this point? So we're asking the wrong question. Even if we knew the answer to "Why?" it doesn't change what we have to do.

What about "how"?

No. Because it's such a personal thing. You take the journey with this family, who haven't even grieved. It's been a year, and it's so horrifying that they've just shut down. The play reveals the reawakening, the return to consciousness, allowing yourself to feel - not only to feel tragedy, but to feel our lives and the world that we live in and the fact that we're participants in it, and that we have a choice. The play only returns us to the precipice of "making a choice." It doesn't matter what the choice is, as long as we're active and not complacent. And that's *plenty* for an evening in the theater.

Discussion Questions

- Harriet, Jane and Brian all deal with Michael's death in different ways. What coping mechanisms does each one use? In what ways are their reactions to Michael's death similar?
- What is the significance of the samba within the context of the play? Why do you think Harriet is so violently opposed to dancing early in the play? Why is she able to dance by herself at the end?
- What is the significance of Bia's character? After seeing the play, why do you think the author made the choices that he did with her character?
- Research the practice of voodoo. What is the difference between voodoo and Candomblé ?
- Why do both Bia and Joel initially refuse to take Harriet to a Candomblé ceremony?
- Where does racism appear in the play? Why do you think the author included these sections?
- Consider the colors of the set, lights and costumes. What significance does color have on the play? How do the colors in the play tie in to what you know about Candomblé and orixás (*see page 5*)?

Sources and Suggested Reading

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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.milwaukeerep.com