

STUDY GUIDE

2004–2005 SEASON

THE REPERTORY THEATRE OF ST. LOUIS



BY WILLIAM NICHOLSON
DIRECTED BY STEVEN WOOLF

C O N T E N T S

- 2. Words to the Wise
- 3. Who's Who?
What's the Story?
- 4. Read More About It
- 5. Q & A

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Words to the Wise

Tunbridge Wells, Maidstone—towns southeast of London

W.H. Auden—British-born American writer who established his importance in 20th-century literature; publications include collections such as *The Dance of Death* and *The Double Man*

Cossack—a member of a people of southern European Russia and adjacent parts of Asia, noted as cavalymen of exceptional military prowess, especially during czarist times



George Herbert—one of the English metaphysical poets. His verse is marked by quietness of tone, precision of language, metrical versatility, and the use of conceits. He wrote in the early 1600's, but was unpublished until after his death.

fifth form papers—the academic papers of fifth grade students

“go for”—In the play, this phrase often means to deliberately antagonize or incite someone.

Edwin Muir—British author who became a poet



in his late 50's. His poetry often explored the meaning of the spiritual universe.

Taj Mahal—The Taj Mahal mausoleum is considered one of the most beautiful buildings in the world and the finest example of the late style of Indian Islamic architecture. It was constructed in the 1630's.

“Ozymandias”—a famous poem by the English poet Percy Shelley. It is known for its irony, and it explores the value of physical, human achievements.

windcheater—jacket

Protties—slang for English Protestants

Kyrie—the title of a prayer at Roman Catholic Mass, spoken by the priest and repeated by the congregation

Agnus Dei—name given to the Latin prayer recited three times by a priest at Mass. The prayer translates to “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.”

Charlotte Mew—an English poet who took her own life in 1928

Remembrance Day—the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. This day commemorates the signing of the armistice that ended World War I in 1918. It is a day set aside to remember those who have been killed in war.

solicitor—an attorney who advises clients on legal matters and prepares cases for barristers to present in the higher courts; *chiefly British*

Howard

Carter—a famous Egyptologist in the early 1900's. He successfully excavated the tombs of Hatshepsut, Tutankhamen and others.

forth come—to provide information; to communicate, especially regarding one's feelings

survivor guilt—a deep sense of guilt often felt by those who have survived a catastrophe. Survivors often feel that they did not do enough to save those who died or that they are unworthy relative to the perished.

rota—a roll call or roster of names; *chiefly British*

Rilke—Rainer Maria Rilke, often considered the greatest lyric poet of modern Germany

gaga—senile; crazy



Who's Who?

Jamie is in his early thirties. He has a flat in London and has come to his parents' house for the weekend at his father's request.

Edward is Jamie's father. A quiet man, he has a passion for the past and is, appropriately, a history teacher. In his free time he loves to do crossword puzzles, and he is currently reading a book that details the experiences of those who survived the tragic Retreat of 1812.

Alice is Jamie's mother. She is a devout Catholic and very outspoken. Poetry is her passion, and she can recite hundreds of poems by heart. She is currently assembling an anthology of poetry as well.

THE CONFIRMATION

by Edwin Muir

Yes, yours, my love, is the right human face.

I in my mind had waited for this long.

Seeing the false and searching for the true.

Then found you as a traveler finds a place

Of welcome suddenly amid the wrong

Valleys and rocks and twisting roads.

But you,

What shall I call you? A fountain in a waste,

A well of water in a country dry,

Or anything that's honest and good, an eye

That makes the whole world bright. Your open heart,

Simple with giving, gives the primal deed,

The first good world, the blossom, the blowing seed,

The hearth, the steadfast land, the wandering sea,

Not beautiful or rare in every part,

But like yourself, as they were meant to be.

What's the Story?

The Retreat From Moscow

is based on the actual breakup of Playwright William Nicholson's parents. The play follows the memory of Jamie, and he will often move from one recollection to another quickly. This will be indicated by triple asterisks in the following summary, although not all scenes are represented here due to length.

Act I

Jamie has arrived at his parent's house, which is a few hours drive southeast of London. His father, Edward, had asked him to come for the weekend. Jamie is listening to Edward read a terrifying account from the diary of a man who was in Napoleon's tragic Retreat from Moscow. Jamie and his dad make small talk until Jamie's mother, Alice, enters. She is thrilled to see Jamie, as it had been months since his prior visit.

* * *

Edward is reading a survivor account to Alice, but she dismisses the morbid tale as "utter rot." She questions Edward about various issues, ranging from their son to their upcoming wedding anniversary. She expresses her displeasure regarding all his answers. As they speak she picks up Edward's book, and he asks her not to lose his place. She promptly does. Edward then says not to worry about it. She becomes confrontational. She expresses her concern that Edward never truly asks about her, and that he no longer cares about their marriage.

* * *

Alice asks Edward to put down his crossword and talk to her. He tries to avoid the conversation, but she forces it. She asks him if he is happy, and he says no. They both reveal their unhappiness with the current state of their marriage.

Edward explains that he feels nothing he says or does is good enough for Alice. She tells him she feels he is never really there, that he has abandoned their marriage. Edward wants a "sunny" marriage, while Alice wants a "real" one. Their conversation degenerates. Alice slaps Edward in the face and upturns the dining table.

* * *

Alice is telling Jamie about her argument with Edward. She calls Edward a coward who will not reveal his true feelings. Jamie tells her she should be nicer and not "go for" Edward so much. She tells Jamie how much she loves him, and quotes a poem by Edwin Muir that has always reminded her of his face.

* * *

Jamie discovers why his dad wanted him to come for the weekend, as Edward reveals he is going to tell Alice he is leaving her. Edward wanted Jamie there to comfort her afterward. Jamie's dad also discloses that he has fallen in love with someone else, a woman named Angela.

* * *

Edward tells Alice their marriage is no longer working, but at first she mistakes his intentions. She thinks he is finally opening up and communicating, but then she begins to understand he is leaving. She breaks down, begging him to stay, but he refuses.

* * *

Jamie is now visiting his mother every weekend. Alice demands to know why he is taking his father's side and allowing Edward to leave her. It becomes apparent Jamie is now caught between the two in their divorce. They leave and Edward enters. He delivers a monologue in which he reveals how he met and fell in love with Alice. He calls it a mistake.

Act II

Edward visits Jamie at his flat in London, and they discuss a suicide threat that Edward recently received from Alice. Neither believes she will do it, but they are not entirely sure. They discuss the signing of the divorce papers, and Jamie convinces Edward that he should come to the house to ask Alice to sign them.

* * *

When Jamie arrives at his mother's house, he finds she now has a dog that she has named Eddie. Jamie is embarrassed. Alice speaks of the stigma society attaches to a "left woman," and she reveals her depression. She is not coping well with the divorce, and she wants Edward to come back to her. Edward arrives with the divorce papers (and meets Eddie the dog), but Alice needles him about his "treachery." He leaves.

* * *

Edward is sharing another account of the Retreat of 1812 with

Jamie. Edward talks of survivor guilt, and Jamie relates it to what his father is feeling: just as the soldiers felt guilt for leaving their comrades by the roadside to die, Edward feels guilt over leaving Alice. Edward says he knows he did the right thing; he is now more himself than he has been since he and Alice married. But he does feel guilty. Edward reveals that he will soon be moving to Durham with Angela. Jamie tells Edward that, in all the years of his parent's marriage, Edward was never open with Alice regarding his feelings.

* * *

Alice tells Jamie she has finished compiling her poetry anthology, and that she has a new plan for dealing with her pain over the divorce. Jamie listens and watches her, terrified, as she pulls a kitchen knife from the anthology folder. She relates how she will go to Angela's house, where Edward now lives, and present him with the anthology. She will then commit suicide in front of him, and spray blood all over Angela's pretty carpet.

* * *

Alice visits Edward at Angela's house, and she has her poetry anthology with her. Alice asks Edward if he can remember any of her poems, and he recites one to her. She is shocked. She then states that Edward must now be happy, and he says that he is. She gives the anthology to him. He starts reading through the papers with interest, spots the knife and passes it to Alice—paying no attention to the knife whatsoever. She puts the knife down as Edward reads one of her poems aloud.

* * *

Jamie delivers a monologue. He reveals the depth of his feelings for his parents, his dependence on them, and his guilt for being their son. "As you suffer," he says, "so I shall suffer. As you endure, so I shall endure. Forgive me for worshipping you. Forgive me for needing you to be strong forever. Forgive me for being your child."



Read More About It

We encourage you to examine these topics in-depth by exploring the following books, websites and videos.

You can visit the homepage of William Nicholson—playwright, scriptwriter, and author—at <http://williamnicholson.co.uk>. The site contains information on his movies, films and books. It is also updated to include information on future projects.

The Retreat From Moscow by William Nicholson. Anchor; 2004. This is the script of the play in published form.

For information on divorce, including how to help kids cope with one or how to save a marriage, visit www.divorcemag.com.

With Napoleon in Russia: The Illustrated Memoirs of Faber Du Faur, 1812. Greenhill Books; 2001. Faber du Faur, artist and soldier, was one of the survivors of the fatal Retreat of 1812. With both its illustrations and text, the book brings to life the horrific experiences of the soldiers serving in the Grand Armée.

1812 The Great Retreat: Told by the Survivors by Paul Britten-Austin. Greenhill Books; 1996. The third book in a three volume series on Napoleon's campaign in Russia, this volume tells the story of the Great Retreat in the words of those who survived it.

Napoleon by A&E Network Studios. This is a set of DVD's that covers the life and times of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, including the fatal Retreat from Moscow. On occasion, this series is also shown on The History Channel.

For a wealth of information on the Retreat of 1812, as well as on Napoleon himself, visit www.napoleonguide.com/campaign_russia.htm. The site includes many horrific, yet vivid, survivor accounts.

The website at <http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~jrubarth/gslis/lis385t.16/Napoleon> provides information on the retreat that includes bios of the major participants and an illustrated timeline.

Q & A

These questions and activities are designed to help students anticipate the performance and then to build on their impressions and interpretations after attending the theatre. The activities and questions are divided into “**Before the Performance**” and “**After the Performance**” categories. While most of the exercises provide specific instructions, please feel free to adapt these activities to accommodate your own teaching strategies and curricular needs. To assist you in incorporating these materials into your existing curriculum, we have provided the numbers of some of the corresponding Missouri Knowledge Standards and Illinois Learning Standards. In addition, the majority of the content integrates or allows demonstration of the following Missouri Performance Goals: 1.5, 1.9, 2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5 and 4.1.

COMMUNICATION ARTS

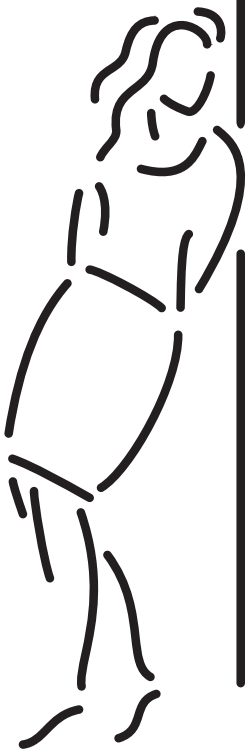
Before the Performance

1 What qualities do you believe characterize a lasting marriage? Is communication the most important quality? Are common goals more crucial? Compatible personalities? Make a list, in order of importance, of the five most vital things any marriage must have in order to last. Save this list for after the performance. (MO: CA1, CA4, CA6 IL: 1, 3, 4, 5)

2 The number of divorces in society has grown for many years. There are numerous reasons marriages are dissolved, from financial difficulties to personality differences. Although some breakups involve children and others do not, most all are tragic for those involved. If your family has experienced divorce, or if the family of a friend has gone through one, then you may have noticed that each party involved has a strikingly different perspective of the event. Write a short story about a real or fictional divorce. Take the point of view of one person involved, whether one of the spouses or a child, and be sure to maintain that point of view throughout the story. (MO: CA1, CA4, CA6, SS6 IL: 1, 3, 4, 5, 18)

3 Analyze the story you wrote in question 2, but consider the story from the perspective of one of the other people involved. If the story were written from this person’s point of view, how would it differ? (MO: CA1, CA4, CA6, SS6 IL: 1, 3, 4, 5, 18)

4 Alice, Jamie’s mother, recites numerous poems throughout *The Retreat From Moscow*. In addition, she is assembling an anthology of the poems that have meant the most to her throughout her life. Divide your life thus far into at least three separate time periods, and give each period a title, such as “Formative Years with Dad,” “Discovering Hoops,” or “Falling in Love.” Now, find or write one poem to go with each period. Read your poetry anthology to the class, and describe why you chose each poem. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA4, CA5, CA6, CA7 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5)



After the Performance

5 Analyze the metaphor in the title of the play. To what in the play does the metaphor refer? Is it the life of Jamie, Edward or Alice that is being compared to the Retreat of 1812? Or, is it all their lives? Could the reference to Napoleon's doomed retreat also be making a comment about marriage itself? If so, what is the metaphor implying about it? Write an essay that explores how this metaphor manifests for each character in the play and in their relationships with one another. For instance, what did the soldiers feel during the retreat and what extreme behaviors did they engage in? Did any of the characters in the play experience similar feelings or exhibit similar behavior? Use specific examples from the play to support the points in your essay. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA5, CA6, CA7, FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5, SS2, SS5, SS6 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 15, 17, 18, 25, 27)

6 Edward and Alice each want something different from their marriage. Edward describes the relationship he wants as "sunny," while Alice says she wants a relationship that is "real." Write a paragraph that describes what you believe Edward means by "sunny," and a paragraph that describes what Alice means by "real." Is it possible for them to each get what they desire? Why or why not? (MO: CA1, CA2, CA4, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3 IL: 1, 3, 4, 5, 25, 27)

7 Consult the list of relationship characteristics that you made in Before the Performance. Were some of the items on your list problems that Jamie's parents were experiencing? Were they experiencing issues that were not included? If so, what were they? Have a class debate on the problems in Alice and Edward's marriage. Who is responsible for the breakup? Be sure to support your argument with facts. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA3, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3 IL: 1, 4, 5, 25)

8 By the end of the play, has Jamie found a way to cope with his parent's breakup? If so, how? Support your answer. Answer the same questions in regard to Alice and Edward. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA3, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3 IL: 1, 4, 5, 25)

9 In "Steve's Thoughts" on page 23 in the program for the show, there are several quotes that illuminate the different aspects of marriage. Some are funny, while others are poignant and poetic. Write your own quote about marriage. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA6, CA7, FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, FA5 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

10 Will Edward have a happy marriage with Angela? Why or why not? List details from the play that support your answer. (MO: CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA6, FA1, FA2, FA3 IL: 1, 3, 4, 5, 25)

FINE ARTS

Before the Performance

1 What characterizes a memory? For instance, do you usually remember every detail, or do some aspects fade over time? How much of a memory reflects truth and how much reflects point of view? In what ways are memories similar to dreams? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, CA1, CA2, CA6 IL: 2, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

2 *The Retreat From Moscow* is in some respects a "memory play." The story you will see is about the divorce of Jamie's parents, and it is told from his perspective. How would a memory play differ from a narrative told by a third party? What are the advantages and disadvantages of telling a story as a participant rather than as an outsider? Support your argument. (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, CA1, CA2, CA6 IL: 2, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)



3 The play you will see takes place in various locations and over several months time. It follows the course of Jamie's memories regarding the divorce of his parents. If you were the director and designer for such a play, how would you show the passage of time from one scene to the next? How would you indicate the different locations, such as Jamie's apartment in London and his parent's house in the county? Be sure to consider lighting, scenery, music and props as well as actor movements. Make a list of your ideas for use after the show. (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, CA1, CA2, CA4, CA6 IL: 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

After the Performance

4 There are many stories, movies and plays that explore the tragedy of divorce, and many of them paint a very different picture than *The Retreat From Moscow*. Compare *Retreat* to another story, movie, or play about divorce (you can also use the short story you wrote in Communication Arts, Before the Performance). What are the similarities and differences between the two? In particular, consider the dialogue and tone in each work. How would you describe these two aspects in each work? Does this make one story more effective than the other for you? Why or why not? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, CA1, CA2, CA3, CA4, CA6 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

5 What techniques were used to indicate changes in time or location in the play? Were these elements similar to the ideas you listed in Before the Performance? Given that the play represents Jamie's memories of his parent's breakup, how did the set, lighting and music reflect this? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, CA1, CA2, CA4, CA6 IL: 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

6 The painting on the backdrop for the show, which Scenic and Costume Designer Marie Anne Chiment refers to as an "Infinity Wall," is inspired by the work of Nathan Oliveira, an American painter from the early 1900's. What movement of art characterizes the style in which the wall is painted? How does this type of art support the mood of the play? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, CA1, CA2, CA6 IL: 2, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

7 The costumes for the characters in the show were inspired by three of the four primary elements: earth, air, fire and water. Given the colors and textures of the costumes, can you identify which element the costume designer associated with each character? (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, CA1, CA2, CA6 IL: 2, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)

8 Split into groups of three and write a scene for a play. Your scene should be a recreation of a scene from *The Retreat From Moscow*, but it should be told from the point of view of Alice or Edward rather than Jamie. Consider how that person's memory of the events would be different, and how his or her relationships with the others would change. How does this make the scene develop differently? Perform your scene for the class. (MO: FA1, FA2, FA3, FA4, CA1, CA2, CA4, CA6 IL: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 25, 26, 27)



SOCIAL SCIENCES

Before the Performance

1 Napoleon's retreat from Moscow—often called The Great Retreat, the Retreat of 1812 or the Retreat from Moscow—is one of the most tragic events in the history of warfare. Although the events were often horrific, from a historical perspective we are fortunate that many of the soldiers in the retreat recorded their experiences in diaries. Read the journal excerpt on page 8, and then research the Retreat of 1812. Write an essay about it. Be sure your paper lists the mistakes that were made which led to the tragedy, the hardships the soldiers faced, and how they tried to cope with such extreme circumstances.



Were the emotions the soldiers felt similar to the emotions that people experience when they have a personal tragedy? Support your answer. (MO: SS2, SS4, SS5, SS6, SS7, CA1, CA3, CA4, CA6 IL: 1, 3, 4, 5, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18)

2 Those who experience a great tragedy—such as the Retreat of 1812—often suffer from a condition known as survivor guilt. What emotions are experienced by people suffering from this condition? Are the emotions they experience logical or illogical? What often characterizes their behavior? What events in history have caused large numbers of people to experience survivor guilt? (MO: SS2, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA3, CA6 IL: 1, 4, 16, 17, 18)

3 What do Charles VII of Sweden, Napoleon and Hitler all have in common? What can be learned from the similar mistake that each man made? (MO: SS2, SS4, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA3, CA6 IL: 1, 4, 16, 17, 18)

After the Performance

4 Examine the dynamics of Jamie's family. What role does each person play? What does each person desire and expect from the others in the family? In regard to the dissolution of their family unit, what does each person fear? Consider the questions above in a universal sense: Are the roles they played common in all families? Would the fears you listed be common for any person in the same situation? Explain your answers. (MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA3, CA6, FA1, FA3, FA5 IL: 1, 4, 5, 16, 18)

5 Alice is a very religious woman, and much of her strength derives from her faith. What reasons did Alice give for her belief in religion? What reasons does Jamie give for not ascribing to a religion? Do you agree with Alice's argument or Jamie's? Give reasons for your answer. At one point in the play, Alice asks Edward to explain to Jamie why there is misery in the world, and Edward states: "the fundamental premise in the

argument is that God created us as free beings. He gave us free will. So he can't really stop us from doing terrible things to each other without taking away our free will and turning us into puppets." Do you agree with this statement? Explain. Given this statement and Edward's behavior in the play, would you consider

him a religious man? Why or why not? (MO: SS2, SS6, CA1, CA3, CA6, FA1, FA3, FA5 IL: 1, 4, 5, 16, 18)



6 In the play, Alice says that "middle-aged women have become invisible," and she describes the stigma that a "left woman" carries. Do divorced women carry a stigma in our society today? Support your answer. Also, compare the perception of divorced women today to that of 100 years ago. Has society's perception of divorced women changed? If so, in what ways? (MO: SS1, SS2, SS6, CA1, CA3, CA6, FA1, FA3, FA5 IL: 1, 4, 5, 14, 16, 18)

7 Have a class debate on the following questions: Given the tragedy that usually accompanies divorce, why do you believe the practice has become more prevalent in our society over time? Can the trend be reversed? If you believe so, how?

(MO: SS2, SS5, SS6, CA1, CA3, CA6, FA1, FA3, FA5 IL: 1, 4, 5, 16, 18)

The Horror... the horror...



The following is an excerpt from the notebooks of Jean-Roch Coignet, who served under Napoleon during the Retreat from Moscow:

The roads were like glass. The horses fell down and could not get up. Our worn-out soldiers no longer had strength in their arms. The barrels of their muskets were so cold that they stuck to their hands. It was 28 degrees below zero [Celsius]. But the guard gave up their sacks and muskets only with their lives. We had to eat the horses that fell down on the ice. The soldiers opened the skin with their knives and took out the entrails, which they roasted on the coals—if they had time to make a fire—and, if not, they ate them raw. They devoured the horses before they died. I also ate this food as long as the horses lasted.

The men of the demoralized army marched along like prisoners, without arms or knapsacks. There was no longer any human feeling for one another. Each man looked out for himself. Every sentiment of humanity extinguished. No one would have reached out to his own father; and that can be easily understood. For he who stooped to help his fellow would not rise again. The men became insensible to every human feeling. No one murmured against our misfortunes. The men fell frozen stiff all along the road. One must have seen these horrors in order to believe them!