

DISCOVERY GUIDE

# COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA

BY WILLIAM INGE  
DIRECTED BY  
MICHAEL PRESSMAN

JUNE 17–JULY 15, 2007  
KIRK DOUGLAS THEATRE



 Center  
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L.A.'s Theatre Company

P.L.A.Y.

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

# How to Use this Discovery Guide

**A COUPLE OF MIDDLE-AGE**—he, a recovering alcoholic, she, a yearning housewife—are forced to confront their disappointments in William Inge’s classic *Come Back, Little Sheba*, presented at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in a new revival directed by Michael Pressman.

This Discovery Guide has been created to complement and extend your experience of *Come Back, Little Sheba*. You will find here a summary of the play and its characters, a brief discussion with the director Michael Pressman about the play and the production, and a brief consideration of how the lives of American women have changed since 1950. Each section will include questions and exercises which allow you to engage with and respond to the play and the production.

Vocabulary words are in **bold** type. You will find definitions of these words within each section.

## Objectives of this Discovery Guide

Offer insights into the play, playwright and production

Examine some ways that the lives of American women have changed since 1950

Provide an overview of the play’s dramatic events

Direct you to resources which will help you further explore the works of playwright William Inge





# Come Back, Little Sheba

## SYNOPSIS

*Come Back, Little Sheba*

The play is set in the mid-20th century in a Midwestern town.

Married for some twenty years, Doc and Lola live in a neglected house in a run-down neighborhood. Doc, a chiropractor, is a withdrawn, quiet and somewhat **prudish** man, and a **diligent** and determined member of Alcoholics Anonymous. Lola is a sweet woman of middle age, eager for her husband's affection and some purpose in life. She and Doc have no children and as he does not want her to work, Lola spends most of her time alone, too disheartened to even care for her house. Lola is naturally **gregarious** and when she has company, she is **vivacious** and given to talking about the past: how she was a popular beauty queen in high school; how Doc was even more shy and sexually inexperienced than she was when they started going together; how she became pregnant and they had to marry quickly and, consequently, Doc was forced to abandon his dream of being a physician; how they lost their child and Lola became infertile; how Doc became "sick" (as Lola describes his alcoholism) and lost his inheritance. Unlike Lola, Doc is uneasy with his memories, and urges her "to live for the present."

Much of Lola's present is focused upon Marie, a carefree young college student who is boarding in the house and whose love life fascinates and delights Lola. Marie is engaged to a young

man back in her home town but is dating Turk, a **caddish** college jock, with whom she has a clearly sexual rather than romantic relationship. Lola cannot resist helping the young couple find time alone together—or spying on them when they are. Doc, too, is fascinated with Marie and infatuated with the young woman he thinks of as "decent," innocent and pure. And he is extremely jealous of and hostile toward Turk.

Lola comes to life when she learns that Marie's fiancé Bruce is going to visit; she cleans and renovates the house and plans a lavish dinner for the couple. However, on the morning of the dinner Doc suddenly discovers—or for the first time fully realizes—that the "decent" Marie and Turk have been having sex. Heartbroken and stunned, Doc leaves, taking with him the whiskey he keeps to test his commitment to sobriety.

Bruce, an affluent, snobbish youth, is scornful of Lola's efforts to entertain, but far more disturbing is Doc's failure to come home for the dinner. Fearing the worst, Lola calls Doc's AA sponsor, Ed Anderson. But the truth exceeds Lola's fears, and in the ferocious confrontation that follows, the couple is forced to face the disappointments that threaten their marriage.



# Come Back, Little Sheba

**S. Epatha Merkerson as Lola**  
His wife; once **ebullient**,  
now often anxious



**Alan Rosenberg as Doc**  
A chiropractor and  
recovering alcoholic



**Jenna Gavigan as Marie**  
Their boarder, a  
lighthearted **coed**  
at the local university



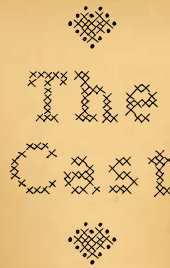
**Josh Cooke as Turk**  
Marie's boyfriend,  
a college athlete



**Bill Heck as Bruce**  
Marie's fiancé from  
her home town



**Michael Dempsey  
as Elmo Huston**  
An experienced  
Alcoholics Anonymous  
member



**Roger Aaron Brown  
as Ed Anderson**  
Doc's sponsor in  
Alcoholics Anonymous



**Joe Mahon  
as Messenger**



**Brenda Wehle  
as Mrs. Coffman**  
Doc and Lola's  
next door neighbor



**Lyle Kanouse  
as Postman**



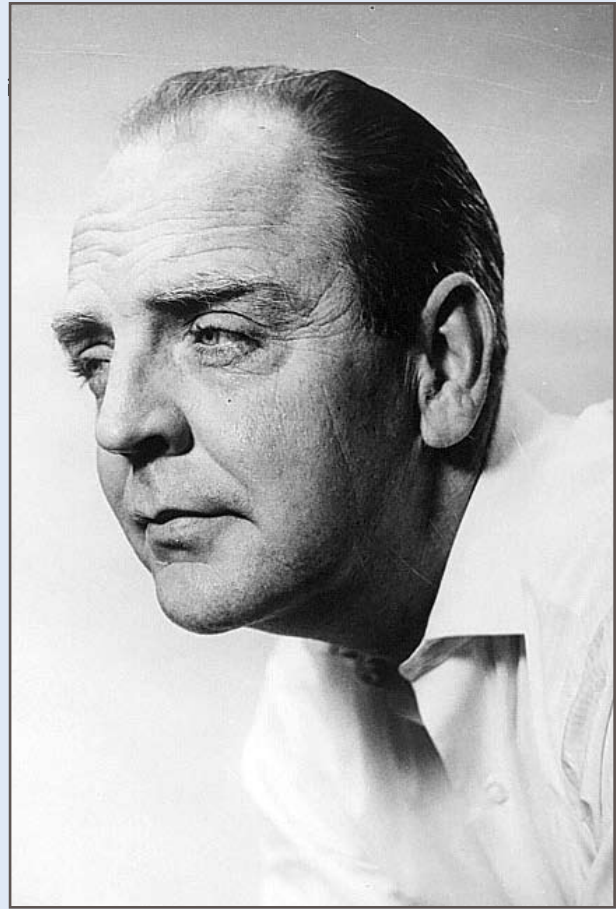
**Matthew J. Williamson  
as Milkman**



## William Inge

**BORN IN 1913**, in Independence, Kansas, William Inge spent the first half of his life in small Midwest communities whose society and **denizens**, especially the women, inspired his writing. After suffering stage fright in his mid-twenties, Inge abandoned his dreams of becoming an actor. In 1945 he saw *The Glass Menagerie*, the breakthrough play by his friend Tennessee Williams, and realizing that great drama could be made about the lives of ordinary people, Inge resolved to become a playwright. Four consecutive Broadway successes—*Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950), the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Picnic* (1953), *Bus Stop* (1955) and *Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (1957)—established Inge as one of the preeminent playwrights of his generation.

Inge's Broadway successes were followed by four consecutive unsuccessful New York productions. Even at the height of his career, Inge suffered from depression which he tried to relieve with alcohol and painkillers. Both his depression and drug abuse worsened as his theatre career faded. He had success as a screenwriter—winning an Oscar for his screenplay for *Splendor in the Grass* (1961)—and published two novels, but by the 1970s, Inge had lost faith in his ability to write. In June 1973, he committed suicide



## Vocabulary

**CAD:** A mean, unprincipled person; usually a man who is ungentlemanly towards or dishonorable with women

**COED:** A female college student; short for coeducational, which refers to schools that have both male and female students

**DENIZEN:** Inhabitant; a person or creature who frequents or lives in a particular place

**DILIGENT:** Persevering; careful, painstaking and steady in fulfilling a task or responsibility

**EBULLIENT:** High spirited, overflowing with life and enthusiasm

**GREGARIOUS:** Sociable; outgoing; preferring and enjoying company

**PRUDE:** A person overly concerned with being proper or modest; often someone uncomfortable with and disapproving of sexual matters

**VIVACIOUS:** Lively, animated, full of life

## Questions/Exercises

1. William Inge's characters are often unaware of, or are unable to acknowledge, what they are feeling or why. In addition, they sometimes lack the concepts, the frame of reference, or the vocabulary to articulate what they are feeling. Instead, in *Come Back, Little Sheba*, Lola's suppressed feelings are expressed in her dream about her lost dog, Little Sheba.

List two different things that Little Sheba might represent. For each, explain briefly why you think Lola keeps dreaming about her.

2. William Inge's plays tend to have ambiguous endings that leave us unsure about what will happen to his characters.

Now that you have explored what Little Sheba represents to Lola—and to the story—how do you interpret Lola's final dream, in which she sees her dog dead and Doc will not let her stop and take care of the puppy? Ask someone else who has seen the play what they think of Lola's dream. Do they understand it differently from you?

3. As noted above, Inge's characters are often unable to acknowledge what they truly feel. They are, as we say today, "in denial" and many of the most dramatic and moving moments in Inge's plays occur when characters are forced to confront the painful truths they have been avoiding. For example, when Doc realizes that he has been deceiving himself about Marie's innocence or when Lola hears how unattractive she has become for Doc.

Have you ever had the experience of realizing that you were not being honest with yourself or were deliberately avoiding recognizing or accepting a painful or embarrassing truth? Write a short essay describing how you avoided the painful fact and how you came to recognize it.

### Young love?

Good times?

Hope for something that is gone or lost?



To go back to a perfect time or place?

Youth?

Photo courtesy of Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts



# P.L.A.Y. talks with director Michael Pressman about his revival of *Come Back, Little Sheba*

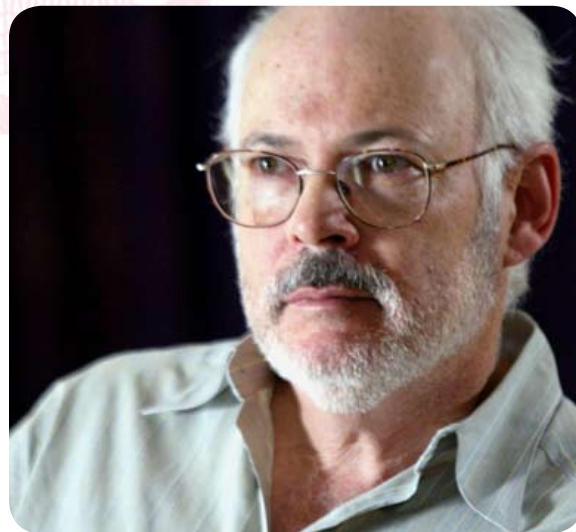
**P.L.A.Y.:** Why did you want to direct *Come Back, Little Sheba*?

**MICHAEL PRESSMAN:** I directed a reading of the play in New York a few years ago and found that the audience was not only enthralled by the drama, but was eager to discuss the play’s issues. After half a century the work remains very compelling and deeply resonant. The characters and relationships are complicated—just as such things tend to be in real life—and I think almost everyone sees a bit of themselves and their marriage or relationship in Doc and Lola. I think today we experience the play as very much about how people find the courage to confront their demons.

**P.L.A.Y.:** What are some of the issues in *Come Back, Little Sheba* that contemporary audiences find engaging?

**PRESSMAN:** The difficulties Doc and Lola face in their lives—their disappointments, their struggle to communicate—certainly resonate with today’s audiences. Alcoholism and addiction—the sorrows they cause and that cause them—are, sadly, still matters many people experience. And I think we see Lola differently today from the way audiences did 57 years ago. We realize that she is trapped by the **mores** of her age.

I also notice that people respond very strongly to the play’s portrayal of a much simpler age and way of life, of ordinary American life before the Internet and cell phones. It’s not that it is portrayed as a happier time; clearly these people have sorrows and sorrows very like our own. But I think some people do feel a powerful sense of nostalgia for a time when the pace of life was not so rapid and the noise—the “information”—was not so incessant. By so meticulously showing life from an earlier age, the play makes us consider how we live today.



**P.L.A.Y.:** Inge is highly regarded but rarely revived. What are your plans for the production?

**PRESSMAN:** I certainly hope to shake things up and make people see the play in a new way. Inge tends to be thought of, and done, as a very **realistic** or **naturalistic** writer. This production is more in a style I call “suggestive reality,” somewhat in the manner of Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*, the play that inspired Inge.

And casting is a big issue with *Come Back, Little Sheba*. It’s not just that you need a gifted actress to play Lola. The role was for decades so strongly associated with Shirley Booth, who created the role on Broadway and then won an Oscar for her performance in the movie, that it was hard for an actress and audience to come to it fresh. I think enough time has passed that another great actress can make the role her own, which is what S. Epatha Merkerson is doing. The production’s color-blind casting also helps audiences to see beyond the surface of the play and into the fundamental issues that Inge is exploring.

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## Questions/Exercises

1. Michael Pressman says that his production of *Come Back, Little Sheba* is not done in a strictly realistic or naturalistic style. After you see the play, consider the show's set, lighting and sound design, and the staging and acting style (for instance, how the actors move or talk). List three specific examples of effects that create the "suggestive reality." Then describe how each of your examples heightens one's experience of the play's story or themes.
2. "Color-blind casting" is the practice of casting an actor in a part without considering whether the actor's ethnicity matches the supposed ethnicity of character. It is common in productions of non-realistic works, such as Shakespeare's plays. It is a far more daring choice when doing plays that are meant to realistically portray an actual place, period or culture.

Write a short essay describing if and how the use of color-blind casting affected your experience of *Come Back, Little Sheba*. Would you have experienced the play differently if all the actors had the same ethnicity? What if they had all been white, as Inge certainly imagined them to be? How did the casting affect the play's reality for you? Do you think color-blind casting changes how you understand the play's story or theme?

## Vocabulary

**MORES:** The traditional practices, customs, or values of a society

**NATURALISM:** A style of drama developed in the late 19th century that tries to create in the theatre a perfect replica of reality, which can appear less real for all of its often unnoticed detail

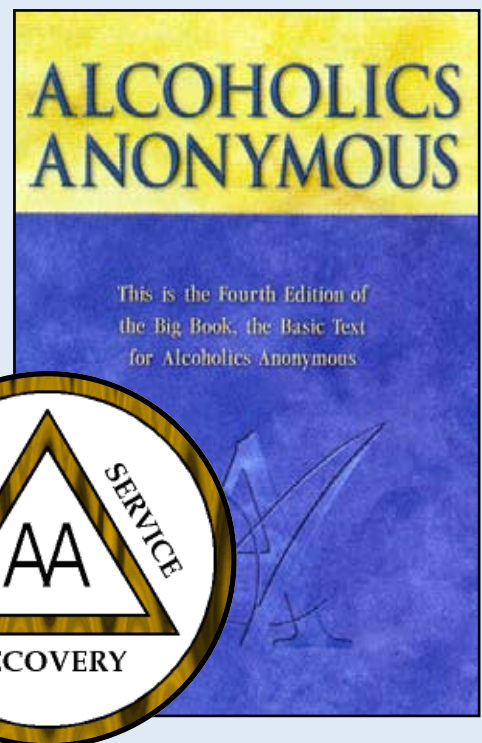
**NOMENCLATURE:** The terms or names used by a particular system, community, or discipline

**REALISM:** In art and literature, a style of portraying things as the viewer or reader expects to see them in ordinary life

## Twelve Steps

### ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS WAS STARTED

in 1935 by Dr. Robert Smith and Bill Wilson, both of whom were struggling with alcoholism and belonged to the Oxford Group, a Christian movement whose principles—acknowledging one's helplessness, surrendering to a higher power, confronting one's failings, sharing one's stories with the group, making restitution and helping others—were adapted to help alcoholics get sober. Their program eschewed specifically Christian **nomenclature** and included absolute abstinence from drinking and providing each member with a "sponsor." The program was codified in the 1939 book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, and focused on twelve "steps" to recovery. Alternative and equally successful methods for treating addictions have been developed (although the success rate is low for all programs), but AA is by far the most popular of all recovery movements and its Twelve Step program has been adapted to the treatment of compulsive behavior of all kinds.





SETTING & CONTEXT

Come Back, Little Sheba

# A Woman's Place, Then and Now

**A RECURRING THEME** in William Inge's work is how ordinary people struggle with loneliness and the effort to find and keep love. Inge's principal characters tend to feel trapped in their lives and by their circumstances, including traditional mores and expectations and their own lack of courage or ability. Inge seemed to feel that women experienced this struggle with particular intensity, primarily because in his America, the possibilities available to women in terms of love, sex, work and identity were far more **circumscribed** than those for men.

In 1950, sex was, to an extent unimaginable today, a **fraught** and **taboo** subject, something about which respectable people did not speak, so that even adults had little access to accurate information on the subject. There were fewer means of contraception, and they were much harder to acquire. The "double standard," which stigmatized women for the same sexual activity that was quietly tolerated in men, was in full force. An unmarried woman who got pregnant faced terrible **opprobrium**; to keep her condition and behavior hidden, she would have to marry, have the baby in secret and give it away or seek an illegal and, consequently, often very dangerous abortion.

A respectable woman was expected to marry young, have a large family and devote herself to being a housewife and mother. The woman who wished to have a career had limited options, as women were barred from many fields and professions. Divorce was far and

rarer far less socially acceptable in 1950, and it could be devastating for women both because "wife" was

their primary, and often only, identity, and because women, having fewer employment options (and often less education), were dependent on their husbands' income.

Many of these attitudes are portrayed in *Come Back, Little Sheba*, although Inge, who is the least **dogmatic** or **tendentious** of playwrights, leaves it for us to judge the attitudes and/or their effect upon the characters. Ignorance, shame and anxiety about sex contribute to Lola's pregnancy as well as the subsequent loss of the child and Lola's fertility when, supposedly out of shame over the rushed marriage, the couple go to a midwife instead of a doctor. Doc's claim that a



physician would know about their premarital sex is questionable, and it is possible he took Lola, without telling her, to an abortionist. Lola feels that she is a failure because she has no children, and her loneliness and boredom are compounded by Doc's refusal to let her work. Marie wants nothing more than to marry and have lots of children and, indeed, quits college to do so, illustrating a then common saying that "Women go to college to get a MRS degree"—i.e. to get married.

A RESPECTABLE WOMAN WAS EXPECTED TO MARRY YOUNG HAVE A LARGE FAMILY AND DEVOTE HERSELF TO BEING A HOUSEWIFE AND MOTHER.



Much has changed over the last half-century. Although women's sexuality and their role as wives and mothers remains a charged subject, it is generally accepted in America that women have sexual desires and sex lives both in and out of marriage, and that marriage and/or motherhood are no longer the only identities for a woman. Women have fought (not yet with complete success) for the right to work in any field or profession they wish; women doctors, lawyers, executives and soldiers are commonplace. Most families, and certainly the American economy as a whole, could not survive if women's participation in the workforce returned to what it was in 1950. And women today do not feel they have to marry or remain in a bad marriage.

Despite these, and many other immense changes in American life, we still understand and empathize with the characters in William Inge's plays. Whatever the social conventions or possibilities, we still struggle to find love and experience aloneness, disappointment, loss, fear and longing.



Coeds at Columbia University, New York.



Women working in a textile factory.



## Questions/Exercises

1. Spend a week keeping a journal on how the media portrays women's attitudes towards sex, work, love, marriage and motherhood. This can include movies, fictional and reality TV series, advertisements, magazines, news reports, pop songs, etc. At the end of the week, look over your journal and see if you can make three general statements about what America thinks women want.

Write a paragraph describing how those general statements compare with your own experience and observations of real people.

2. We have so many more ways for people to meet and communicate than do the people in *Come Back, Little Sheba*—cell phones, text messaging, email, personal ads, online dating, etc.—as well as professionals of all kinds to give people advice about relationships.

Considering all the available ways to connect, discuss with your group or class whether you think people today are any less lonely, or whether marriages and relationships are more authentic and robust, than they were in 1950.

## Vocabulary

- CIRCUMSCRIBE:** To draw a line around, encircle; to restrict or confine
- DOGMATIC:** Asserting, often arrogantly, the truth of unproven principles
- FRAUGHT:** Distressing, tense, troubled
- OPPROBRIUM:** The public disgrace associated with shameful behavior
- TABOO:** Forbidden, unmentionable; often associated with shameful matters
- TENDENTIOUS:** Having an inflexible prejudice or point of view; partisan



Cartoon from *Electrical Merchandising* magazine, 1957.

# RESOURCES

*Come Back, Little Sheba*

Interested in knowing more about William Inge and his plays? Here are some books, websites and films to check out.

## BOOKS

***Four Plays: Come Back, Little Sheba; Picnic; Bus Stop; The Dark at the Top of the Stairs***  
by William Inge (Grove Press, 1994)

***A Loss of Roses***  
by William Inge (Dramatists Play Service, 1998)

***Natural Affection***  
by William Inge (Dramatists Play Service, 1998)

***Where's Daddy?***  
by William Inge (Dramatists Play Service, 1998)

***A Life of William Inge: The Strains of Triumph***  
by Ralph E. Voss (University Press of Kansas, 2000)

## WEBSITES

[www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/tupperware/sfeature/sf\\_women.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/tupperware/sfeature/sf_women.html)

In this episode of the PBS documentary series, American Experience, historian and author Elaine Tyler May discusses how Americans after World War II thought of women and women working.

[www.mayoclinic.com/health/alcoholism/DS00340](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/alcoholism/DS00340)  
A detailed article on alcoholism and its treatment

## FILM & TELEVISION

Most of Inge's full-length plays were adapted into films, often using the same directors as did the works on Broadway, and he also wrote a number of original screenplays. The following are readily available on DVD.

### ***Come Back, Little Sheba***

Directed by Daniel Mann (United Artists, 1952)  
Starring Burt Lancaster as Doc and Shirley Booth as Lola, in an Oscar-winning performance

### ***Picnic***

Directed by Joshua Logan (Columbia Pictures, 1956)  
Logan also directed the Broadway production; starring William Holden and Kim Novak.

### ***Bus Stop***

Directed by Joshua Logan (20th Century Fox, 1956)  
As the "chantoosie" Cherie, movie star Marilyn Monroe, whose company co-produced the film, proved to the world that she could play a dramatic role.

### ***Splendor in the Grass***

Directed by Elia Kazan (Warner Brothers, 1961)  
Starring Warren Beatty and Natalie Wood; Inge won an Oscar for his original screenplay. Two years earlier, Beatty starred on Broadway in Inge's unsuccessful play, *A Loss of Roses*, as he did in the 1963 film adaptation of that play, *The Stripper*.



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Now in its 36th year, Performing for Los Angeles Youth (P.L.A.Y.) is Center Theatre Group's award-winning youth theatre and theatre education program. P.L.A.Y. serves more than 35,000 young people, teachers and families annually through a variety of performances, residencies, discount ticket programs and innovative educational experiences. P.L.A.Y. offers programs that allow young people, teachers and families to attend productions at the Mark Taper Forum, Ahmanson and Kirk Douglas Theatres for low or no cost. P.L.A.Y. is dedicated to artistic excellence and innovation in its theatrical productions and to the development of young people's skills and creativity through the exploration of theatre, its literature, art and imagination.

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