

DISCOVERY GUIDE



# DISTRACTED

BY **LISA LOOMER**

DIRECTED BY **LEONARD FOGLIA**

**WORLD PREMIERE**

**MARK TAPER FORUM**

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 Center  
Theatre  
Group  
L.A.'s Theatre Company

**P.L.A.Y.**

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

Rita Wilson. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

## How to Use this Discovery Guide

**LISA LOOMER'S PLAY** *Distracted* is a comedy-drama in which the playwright examines the impact of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) on a family household and the ways in which concerned parents address the dilemma of how to safely treat the behavioral disorder.

This Discovery Guide has been created to enhance your experience of *Distracted*. The guide contains historical and cultural material and a summary of the play. At the end of each section there are opportunities for you to respond to the play's themes, events and characters.

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



# A World of Distraction

## SYNOPSIS

*Distra***cted**



RITA WILSON

**Mama**, a contemporary mom



RAY PORTER

**Dad**, her husband



HUDSON THAMES

**Jesse**, their nine-year-old son



JOHANNA DAY

**Vera**, a neighbor



MARITA GERAGHTY

**Sherry**, a neighbor



EMMA HUNTON

**Natalie**, Sherry's teenaged daughter



STEPHANIE BERRY

**Mrs. Holly**, a classroom teacher  
**Dr. Waller**, an educational neuropsychologist  
**Carolyn**, the mother of an autistic child  
Nurse, Waitress



BRONSON PINCHOT

**Dr. Broder**, a homeopath  
**Dr. Jinks**, a psychiatrist  
**Dr. Karnes**, an environmental physician  
**Dr. Zavala**, a psychologist



### **DISTRACTED TELLS THE STORY**

of a woman, identified as Mama, and her husband, Dad, who are raising a wildly rambunctious nine-year-old son named Jesse. In their efforts to deal with Jesse's extreme behavior, they encounter, among others, an exasperated classroom teacher, a psychologist and an educational neuropsychologist, all of whom recommend that Jesse be tested for attention deficit **hyperactivity** disorder (ADHD). Ritalin, an aggressive **psycho-stimulant** drug therapy with serious side effects and consequences, is the prevailing approved medication for ADHD. Before resorting to Ritalin for her son, Mama considers alternative

approaches to ADHD—ranging from dietary considerations and allergy treatments to behavior modification programs, educational options and homeopathic remedies—each with varying degrees of success and aggravation in the household. Mama resigns herself to Ritalin to address her son's problem, but the decision has a complicated impact on her marriage and her relationship with her son.

Apart from an examination of ADHD, *Distra***cted** considers the broader issue of the frenzied commotion of the modern world. Characters in the play are pummeled by media, technology, consumerism and their own compulsive behaviors. As Mama

cope with her son's condition, she contends with multi-tasking professionals who tackle several priorities at once. Her discussions with her husband are interrupted by the television, the computer and programming the TiVo. Conversations with neighbors change subject repeatedly, juggling issues, gossip and competing agendas. Mama's own efforts to find a few moments of serenity through meditation are disrupted by telemarketers, cell phone calls and personal neuroses. In a world with such distractions, it appears unlikely that anyone can focus on the problems at hand. The playwright mirrors this confusion by crafting storylines that switch between realities as actors step in and out of their roles.



# SYNOPSIS

*Distracted*



## The Kaleidoscope of ADHD

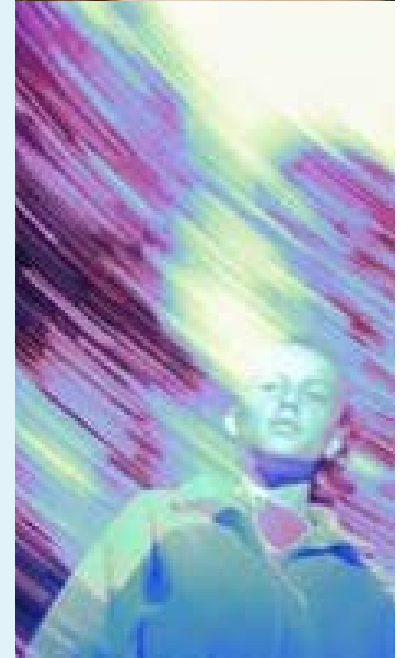
ADHD, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, is a condition that impacts both children and adults. The controversy surrounding kids diagnosed with ADHD can be attributed to several factors:

1. the symptoms of ADHD are an extreme **manifestation** of what might otherwise be dismissed as normal kid behavior;
2. a diagnosis of ADHD is completely **subjective** with no **objective** physical abnormality; and
3. ADHD is typically treated with a class of drugs known as “psycho-stimulants” that are considered addictive and dangerous in adults. The aggravating flip side to the controversy is that children with ADHD, or their parents, report their lives are completely transformed after diagnosis and treatment.

Symptoms of ADHD include an inappropriate degree of inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsive behavior at home, school and in social settings. While much of this behavior sounds like that of a typical child (fidgeting, squirming, not listening, being easily distracted, running about), the distinction is that ADHD kids live in a kaleidoscope of constant distraction. They bounce uncontrollably between thoughts and impulses to such a degree that their ability to learn, socialize or simply function is extremely hampered.

The cause of ADHD is not yet known, but scientists believe it may be due to an imbalance in the parts of the brain that normally inhibit impulsive behavior. Studies have not determined whether the condition is **genetic** or triggered by social or environmental factors. However, more boys are affected by ADHD than girls—two to three times more—and symptoms usually surface before the age of seven. It is estimated that almost two million American children suffer from ADHD, as many as one in every classroom.

There is no cure for ADHD. The most common treatment is a psycho-stimulant medication known as Ritalin. A single pill is given daily and may be continued for months or years. In the majority of diagnosed cases, medication works wonders: children become calmer and more controlled in their actions and ability to focus. At the same time, Ritalin users are carefully monitored because side effects of the drug include loss of appetite, difficulty falling asleep, irritability and a tendency to become withdrawn or weepy. To avoid these risks, many parents opt for alternative therapies, which are often expensive and have not been subjected to scientific trials, but might offer the best solution for a particular family’s needs.



# SYNOPSIS

*Distractions*

## Vocabulary

**Genetic:** Relating to or influenced by the origin or development of a living thing

**Homeopath:** A practitioner of homeopathy, a holistic therapy for disease that attends to the whole of the body and spirit rather than an isolated illness

**Hyperactivity:** A condition characterized by excessive restlessness and movement

**Manifestation:** An indication of the existence, reality or presence of something

**Neuropsychologist:** A licensed psychologist with particular expertise in how behavior and skills are related to brain structures and systems

**Objective:** Based on observable criteria, presented factually

**Psycho-stimulant:** A drug having anti-depressant or mood-altering properties

**Subjective:** Based on feelings and other personal reactions rather than fact

## Questions & Exercises:

1. Take a pad and pen and sit in a crowded, busy place—a bus terminal, shopping mall or cafeteria, for example. Observe the activity around you. Make a list of everything going on as you sit quietly. Then observe your own reactions to the setting: Does the bustling action make you excited? Anxious? Give you a headache? Record all of your feelings and save both lists to compare with the one you are asked to create in Section 4, Setting & Context, when you are given the task to “unplug” for a day.
2. After attending the play, consider the different options for parents whose child is diagnosed with ADHD: drug therapy, homeopathic cures, dietary changes, psychotherapy, behavior modification programs and environmental therapy, among others. What criteria would you apply in making your decision? What are the pros and cons of each approach? Put yourself in the shoes of a parent with an ADHD child and make your choice. You will find pertinent websites in the Resources section to help—and perhaps confuse—your decision. Write a short paragraph justifying your decision.



*Distra*cted

# How to Focus in a Distracted World



**THE STAGE DIRECTIONS** in Lisa Loomer’s play *Distra*cted call for “a world of screens.” Director Leonard Foglia observes, “Lisa was thinking literally. She was expecting television sets and monitors, but I wanted a **multimedia** art installation—like when you walk into a modern art museum and everything is going.” In creating the world premiere stage production of Loomer’s play, Foglia is relying on a team of designers (sound, light, costume, set and projection) to create an environment that replicates a hyperactive child’s view of the world and also provides a visual equivalent to the content of a particular scene. The set was conceived from glass and metal as a mass of **pixels** upon which a **barrage** of images will be projected. A scene set in a kitchen, for example, might be suggested by a close-up image of a stove-top grill and a faucet. Taking his lead from modern architecture, in which, like Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Concert Hall, the eye is never allowed to settle, Foglia imagines “a **Cubist** approach to the play, never straight on. We’ll be painting the play as we go along. It’s going to be a dance between the words and images.”

“Lenny emailed me that it would be a ‘projection extravaganza,’” says projection designer Elaine J. McCarthy. She could readily imagine a world of screens. “Look at billboards, television, movies and laptops, advertisements on telephone booths, bus stops and the sides of buses,” she explains; “every shop window has something zinging at you; we go to the bank and look at computer screens; even our cell phones are screens.” McCarthy plans to acquire the digital visual images for *Distra*cted on location in Los Angeles but observes, “it still needs to feel like Anywhere, U.S.A.” The challenge, she admits, is to create a sense of distraction for the audience without actually distracting them. “The story is core,” she maintains. “The design is all in support of a good story told well. That’s my goal. People should never leave the theatre humming the projections.”

“We’re all here to serve the play,” agrees sound designer Jon Gottlieb. He anticipates “an incredibly interactive process between the design elements—all working together to represent the frenetic nature of a nine-year-old boy with ADD.” Working with McCarthy’s projection design, Gottlieb is creating an aural and visual bombardment. The soundscape will sample media-based sound-bites that replicate “how a boy with ADD might relate to the **cacophony** of sounds in the modern world and, indeed, to manifest that cacophony for the audience.” Gottlieb shares that when searching for sounds to include in the production of Loomer’s play, “I knew exactly where to go first. I have a 10-year-old son, David, and a 14-year-old daughter, Lily; between the two of them, they have the perfect iTunes library for the two kid characters, Jesse and Natalie.”



“a ‘projection extravaganza’”

Director Leonard Foglia and his design team realize Loomer’s “world of screens.”





### Been There, Done That

When Nathan Manning was in the sixth grade, his parents sent him to a prominent doctor to address his inability to pay attention in class or focus on homework. Nathan was aware that he could not remember something unless he wrote it down. He would often start a project and move on to another one before finishing. "I wasn't an extreme case," Nathan recalls, "and the doctor didn't really take my situation seriously. He just told me to take these pills."

The pills were Ritalin. Within days of starting the drug therapy, Nathan noticed harsh side effects, including "extreme depression, tremendous anxiety and appetite suppression." He developed academic and social insecurities that he had not noticed or exhibited before. When Nathan voiced his concerns to the doctor, he recalls being told, "Oh, it's fine just keeping taking it." At times, Nathan stopped taking the drug of his own volition, but he found that his system had grown dependent on the drug. "I'd not take it and I'd go off the wall," he says.

"Ritalin is a double-edged sword," Nathan observes, "because it made me an extraordinarily anxious kid when I didn't need to be. At the same time, it made a lot of opportunities possible for me by the ability to focus." Nathan applied himself to his studies and became an achievement-oriented kid throughout high school. In his sophomore year of college, however, Nathan decided to wean himself off the drug. In pre-med at the time, he was studying neurology and neuro-psychopharmacology. He visited a professor who happened to be a neurobiologist to ask about an exam and ended up getting advice on Ritalin. With the professor's guidance, Nathan weaned himself off the drug.

Nathan acknowledges that it is an ongoing struggle to maintain his focus and concentration. This is less of an issue since he landed a job in the music industry. He describes his office as fast-paced with a certain amount of chaos, volatile personalities and a fairly constant barrage of music and video disruptions. In a more staid environment, Nathan's ADHD might have created challenges. "Here," he says, "I fit in."

"ADHD is a misunderstood disease," Nathan concludes, "and no problem can ever be solved purely with a pill. ADHD is quickly diagnosed in wealthy families with parents who can afford the medication. The kid has already been showered with gifts, toys and vacations. Then when he can't sit down and study for 30 minutes straight, the kid gets diagnosed with ADHD and put on the pill. I call it psycho-pharma-parenting."

*Nathan Manning is a pseudonym*



## Vocabulary

**Barrage:** An overwhelming quantity or explosion

**Cacophony:** A loud, harsh, confusing clamor of disagreeable sounds

**Cubist:** A style of painting in the early 20th century that reduced forms to geometrical equivalents and organized surface planes with no attempt at literal representation

**Multimedia:** The combined use of text, graphics, photography, video, music and sound in computer applications

**Pixel:** The basic unit of the composition of an image on a television screen, computer monitor or similar display; one image may comprise thousands of pixels

## Questions & Exercises:

1. Create the Sound Design for Your Life:  
From the moment you wake up until you go to sleep at night, what do you hear? What sounds do you purposely listen to? What sounds exist outside your control? Write a list of instructions for your sound designer – everything needed to create the soundscape of your typical day. After creating your list, stop and listen carefully. What have you left out? Are there sounds that you hear, but of which you are not consciously aware? Add these to your list.
2. Watch a classic television show—like *I Love Lucy*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Bewitched* or *Gilligan's Island*—and a current television show. (Many are available online at [www.tv.com](http://www.tv.com).) Does one hold your interest more than the other? Is it easier to focus on one of the programs? Get a stopwatch and watch them again. Count the number of times each program cuts to a different camera for a new shot or a new angle in a three-minute segment and time the length of each cut. How has the pacing of television programs changed? What can you conclude about how society has changed? Write a brief essay explaining the results of your research.





# Please turn off your cell phones



**MOST PEOPLE WOULD IDENTIFY** with the frustration of Mama, the main character in *Distracted*, when she is unable to

have a private moment or a simple conversation uninterrupted by the telephone, the television, a text message or TiVo. In recent years, the goal of technology has been to “connect” people. Technology has been so successful in reaching this goal that many people today find themselves “ultra-connected.” They respond to email messages during meetings, bring laptops on vacation and reach for their cell phones at the first break in a work schedule. People who once embraced “quiet time” while driving, shopping or walking the dog are now likely to “use” the time on the cell phone. Airports offer broadband Internet access and airlines are considering making cell phone service available on airplanes. The average office worker is interrupted by a telephone call, email or instant message every three minutes. Research shows that it takes eight minutes for the brain to reach a really creative state. As a consequence, digital intrusions from the cell phone,

laptop and BlackBerry, which are supposed to make work life easier, actually prevent people from achieving peak performance.

American philosopher Albert Borgmann observes that the devices of technology are intended as a faster, safer and easier means to an end. The telephone, for example, provides instant communication; television provides immediate entertainment; computers provide on-the-spot access. As a result, Borgmann writes, people become hooked on convenience and lose the ability to perform or even consider simpler alternatives. For example, a boy might send a text message to his sister instead of walking to her room for a face-to-face conversation. People no longer memorize phone numbers; our telephones remember them for us.

With each new advance, technology requires us to operate at a new speed and rhythm. Text messaging on cell phones requires us to reduce the alphabet to a numeric keypad. Instant messaging has abbreviated language into brief coded slang like “LOL” for “laugh out loud” and “BRB” for “be right

back.” Cell phones have created a world in which we suffer strangers’ private conversations in public—with the added expectation that we can always be reached by phone at any time. In this manner, Borgmann observes, individuals are impacted by technology in that we accelerate to meet the devices; we work faster, expect results sooner and take on more responsibilities.

The **paradox** of modern life is that these conveniences do not necessarily make our lives easier. The common practice of multi-tasking, for example, is largely counterproductive. In Borgmann’s philosophy of technology, hyperactivity is “a state of mobilization where the richness and variety of social and cultural pursuits, and the natural pace of daily life, have been suspended to serve a higher, urgent cause.” While hyperactivity is often described as an individual **pathology** found most often in children and workaholics, Borgmann applies the term hyperactivity to society as a whole. In the modern world, Borgmann asks, **who among us is not hyperactive?**





## Check Your Distraction

Computers used to live in huge boxes that occupied an entire room. More recently, computers lived in boxes under the desk. Nowadays, computers no longer live in boxes. They inhabit and operate everything from cars, telephones and elevators to airplanes, animated movies and traffic lights. A simple microchip in a toaster turns it into a computer. The average laptop—even a child's simple GameBoy—carries more computer power than Apollo 11 in the first moon landing.

Informal surveys report that 40 percent of Americans spend between five and 10 hours at the computer every day, primarily cruising the Internet or checking email. In a recent experiment, a British research institute studied the impact of email on productivity. Two groups of test subjects were assigned an IQ test. The first group took the test without distraction. The second group checked email and responded to instant messages during the test. Not surprisingly, the distracted group scored 10 points lower on the test than the control group. In a separate experiment, the second group was intoxicated by marijuana and test results were reduced by only eight points. Researchers concluded that multi-tasking is marginally more distracting than getting stoned.

Researchers in Palo Alto, California, surveyed Fortune 500 companies and found that individual employees average 178 messages each day via email, phone, voice mail, fax and pager. The typical employee stops work to answer messages three times every hour. How do people cope with the onslaught of information? Ask the chief. Once a year for one full week, Microsoft whiz-kid Bill Gates retreats to a cabin with nothing but printed text material to read.



Early computers filled an entire room while modern computers fit in the palm of your hand. (U.S. Army Photo, number 163-12-62)



# SETTING/CONTEXT

*Distracted*



*date night....  
MONEY....  
She is really talking...  
Took that chance  
Patience is best  
BETRAYED...*

## Questions & Exercises:

1. Choose a day to unplug. For one entire day, eliminate all technology from your life: no cell phone, no BlackBerry, no iPod, no GameBoy, no television, no cable, no TiVo, no DVD, no Nano, no MySpace, no YouTube, no radio, no boom box, no Internet, no Wii, no Xbox. Keep a list of all the devices you have to eliminate in order to be completely free of distraction. Situate yourself in a place where technology cannot find you. If technology intrudes, relocate. Enlist a friend for company or indulge in the solitude. At the end of the day, write an essay documenting your experience and respond to the following questions: What did you discover during the “quiet” time? Were you more relaxed or more anxious? Did you feel more connected to people—or less? How did you “fill” the time? How did other people respond to your isolation? Were they supportive, amused, exasperated or irritated? What did you learn about your friends? What did you learn about yourself? How did it feel to end the experiment and return to the **hubbub** of the technological world?
2. Eavesdrop on a casual conversation between two people who know each other well. Record and write a transcript of the conversation; also take note of the actions the people engage in while talking. Have two members of your class or group read the “scene” aloud. Discuss the scene. Observe how frequently the topic shifts, whether responses are **non-sequiturs** and whether the participants are multi-tasking while they talk. Perhaps they use neutral catch-phrases to express emotion, perhaps they deflect questions by changing the subject, or perhaps there are moments when they are not even listening to each other at all.



# RESOURCES

*Distracted*

Interested in knowing more about the issues and events of *Distracted*? Here are some books, websites and films to check out.



#### BOOKS:

*Driven To Distraction: Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder from Childhood Through Adulthood* by Edward M. Hallowell and John J. Ratey (Touchstone, 1995)

*The Gift of ADHD: How to Transform Your Child's Problems into Strengths* by Lara Honos-Webb (New Harbinger Publications, March 2005)

*Twelve Effective Ways to Help Your ADD/ADHD Child: Drug-Free Alternatives for Attention-Deficit Disorders* by Laura J. Steven (Avery, August 31, 2000)

*Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* by A. Borgmann (University of Chicago Press, 1984) Borgmann's early work on technological culture introduces his critique of technology

*Technology and the Good Life* by Eric Higgs et. al. (University of Chicago Press, 2000)



#### WEBSITES:

[www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/adhdmnu.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/adhdmnu.cfm)  
The National Institute of Mental Health's website: information regarding ADHD

[www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org)  
A national non-profit organization representing children and adults with ADHD

[www.addresources.org/article\\_checklist.php](http://www.addresources.org/article_checklist.php)

A checklist of symptoms of adult ADHD—not intended for purposes of self-diagnosis

[www.bootcampvideo.com](http://www.bootcampvideo.com)

An example of alternative parenting approaches to ADHD

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_K-m-jLjmtQ&mode=related&search=](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_K-m-jLjmtQ&mode=related&search=)

A young boy sings about ADHD. (In German with English subtitles)

[www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/borghayl.html](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/borghayl.html)

An interview between Albert Borgmann and N. Katherine Hayles on The University of Chicago Press website

[www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~rxv/books/borgmann.htm#deviceparadigm](http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~rxv/books/borgmann.htm#deviceparadigm)

An explication of the work of Albert Borgmann, hosted by Veryard Projects



#### FILM & VIDEO:

*The Chalk Garden* directed by Ronald Neame (Universal Studios, 1964) A poignant drama about a governess' efforts to attend an unmanageable child

*A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* directed by Peter Medak (SONY, 1972) A dark comedy about the impact of a profoundly disabled child on its parents



Rita Wilson. PHOTO BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ.

*My Left Foot* directed by Jim Sheridan (Miramax, 1989) A powerful drama about a mother who cultivates the intelligence of her quadriplegic son

*Natural Born Killers* directed by Oliver Stone (Lion's Gate, 1994) A violent story, pertinent here for its chaotic barrage of cinematic images (Has a well-deserved R rating: not recommended for children under 17)

# About P.L.A.Y.

## P.L.A.Y. • Distracted

NOW IN ITS 36<sup>th</sup> 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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