



The
Thanksgiving
Play

by LARISSA FASTHORSE

Directed by SHANNON R. DAVIS

STUDY GUIDE

Livestream dates: Sept 25–Oct 3, 2020

On-Demand viewing: Oct 9–Oct 16, 2020

WELCOME TO A.C.T.

Welcome to Larissa FastHorse's *The Thanksgiving Play!*

Writer, choreographer, and founder of Indigenous Direction Larissa FastHorse is a dual citizen of the Sicangu Lakota Nation and the United States. She stepped into theater after a Theater Communications Group (TCG) conference in 2010, as a political activist with a ten-year plan to change the American Theater. She was determined to make good trouble and necessary space for Native artists and stories. Cut to today: *The Thanksgiving Play* is the first Native American play to make it onto the coveted and widely circulated list of top ten most produced plays in America. Her satire is biting and laugh-out-loud, and has been seen across the country. You can hear my conversation with Larissa and playwright Bruce Norris (*Clybourne Park, Downstate*) on A.C.T.'s podcast **Place: here. Time: now.**

I am thrilled that A.C.T. is bringing this play to you through live virtual theater. It's a rough but intimate medium, where we can notice a blush below the skin or clock easily a furtive glance and see the human vulnerability that fuels all humor. This production feels all the more voyeuristic, mirroring how most elementary school students as well as theater educators are working right now. We get to see songs and playlets from actual teachers' Pinterest boards and online lesson plans. We wince as teaching artist Logan, self-described "vegan ally" Jaxton, and wanna-be playwright Caden come together to put on a play about the first Thanksgiving. Because they've scored a diversity grant, they are joined by actor Alicia, who is "brunette, Caucasian-looking but has looks that would have been cast as ethnic in 1950s movies." The characters apologize, perform with good intentions, occasionally "snap" to encourage one another, and wind up erasing indigenous people from the school's Thanksgiving pageant all over again.

Shannon Davis is a valued member of the Bay Area theater scene. As an artisan, director, choreographer, actor, and educator, she practices decolonization and mindfulness. Per her comprehensive and inspiring website, which I encourage you to check out, she uses "theater as a tool to start meaningful dialogue and to inspire positive change." I know she has changed how the cast of *The Thanksgiving Play*—Allen Darby, Rachel Morrison, Johnny Rice, and Mākena Miller—views a rehearsal as space to share and truly experiment. I was so sad to learn that *Oresteia* at CalShakes, for which Shannon was slated to be associate director and movement director, was canceled due to COVID-19. I look forward to seeing her devised movement-based play *BRAIDED: A Native Noh Story* about Japanese American internment camps and Native boarding school victims later this fall.

Lastly, I want to thank Shannon Davis personally for assisting A.C.T. in making a land acknowledgement which recognizes that our theaters are on the unceded land of the Ramaytush Ohlone nation. You can read our full statement in Jennifer's letter.

Now, please turn off your cell phones—just kidding! We are here to laugh and ultimately reflect. I hope you can watch this show with a small group, as its wickedness should be shared. Enjoy!



Pam MacKinnon (she/her)
Artistic Director

Hello everyone,

Welcome to our fall season!

I am so thrilled that we are producing Larissa FastHorse's *The Thanksgiving Play*. I've had the pleasure of knowing Larissa through the interconnected world of theater and have watched her great success and influence in our field and am grateful we get to share her work with you.

We are pleased at the ingenuity and resilience of the team at A.C.T. As a producing theater we are driven to create. While many theaters are not producing theater right now, we are bringing you numerous creations virtually until we can be together in person.

We have found a way to keep artists working and to profile the talents of our MFA students as part of our mainstage season. You are witnessing some of the top actors in this country at the beginning of their careers. It is inspirational to experience their learning and growth at the same time that they are pioneering live virtual theater for the field.

As part of our commitment to **equity, diversity, and inclusion**, we are in the process of building a meaningful, continual relationship with the local Indigenous theater community. As part of this we begin by honoring the lands upon which we do our work. We would be proud to offer deep gratitude to the tribal band of Ramaytush Ohlone peoples and their lands that cover Northern California and down the Pacific coastline. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the 1700s, the Ramaytush Ohlone numbered approximately 1500 persons, and made their life on the sacred lands. Due to the invasion and the establishment of Franciscan Missions throughout California, only a few families survived and still remain. Those descendants make up the membership of the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone (ARO) today. We honor the Ohlone as a people, their resilience, and all they have done and continue to do in maintaining sacred and ancestral lands, ceremony, and communities to this day.

Thank you for being a part of this season. As a season pass holder, you have access to all virtual performances through June 2021. We plan on adding more events along the way, and those will all become a part of your package at no extra cost! If you're coming to us by way of single tickets to this production, I hope you'll check out the others we have to offer this fall. You can read more about them **here**. Then, stick around in December for our very first *A Christmas Carol: On Air*—a radio play adapted from our beloved holiday tradition.

One of the best ways you can help theaters navigate this time is to continue your commitment as a ticket buyer, as a donor, and to spread the word to your networks. Thank you for your participation. Enjoy the show!

With appreciation,



Jennifer Bielstein (she/her)
Executive Director

The Thanksgiving Play

by **LARISSA FASTHORSE**
Directed by **SHANNON R. DAVIS**

THE CAST

LOGAN **RACHEL MORRISON**
JAXTON **JOHNNY RICE**
CADEN **ALLEN DARBY**
ALICIA **MĀKENA MILLER**

All cast members are students in A.C.T.'s Master of Fine Arts class of 2021.

STAGE MANAGEMENT

STAGE MANAGER **PATRICK MAHONEY**

CREATIVE TEAM

VISUAL DESIGNER **MORGAN BADILLO**
COSTUME DESIGNER **JESSIE AMOROSO**
SOUND DESIGNER **ARIELLA COOLEY**
VIDEO DESIGNER **LUIS GARCIA**
FACULTY VOICE & DIALECT COACHES **CHRISTINE ADAIRE & LISA ANNE PORTER**
FACULTY MOVEMENT COACH **DANYON DAVIS**

CONSERVATORY PRODUCING TEAM

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER **KEN SAVAGE**
CONSERVATORY PRODUCTION MANAGER **MIKE ANDERBURG**
VIDEO CONTENT PRODUCER **BERYL BAKER**

SPECIAL THANKS

ALLEN DARBY, STEVEN FLORES, KATHLEEN GRACE, JO S. HURLEY, LEANNA KEYES,
PETER J. KUO, MĀKENA MILLER, RACHEL MORRISON, JOHNNY RICE

ADDITIONAL CREDITS

"The Thanksgiving Play" is presented by arrangement with Concord Theatricals on behalf of Samuel French, Inc. www.concordtheatricals.com

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SUMMARY

Four white actors devise a play about the origins of Thanksgiving. What could go wrong? Drama teacher Logan wants to put on the most culturally sensitive and historically accurate Thanksgiving play the school's ever seen, but can she overcome the conservative schoolboard, overbearing parents, and her own well-meaning cast? Performative wokeness meets school pageant in this razor-sharp satire from Native American playwright Larissa FastHorse.

WORDS OF PRAISE FOR *THE THANKSGIVING PLAY*

“Satire doesn’t get much richer than that.”

The New York Times

“To do satire well is a balancing act. Many things can go terribly wrong. Rest assured, FastHorse hits the bull’s eye every time she takes aim.”

Judy Nedry, ***Judy Nedry Reviews***

Share your show experience! Tag us in your posts (@ACTSanFrancisco) and use the hashtag #ACTThanksgivingPlay

This production uses satire to explore the legacy of colonialism and violence against Indigenous people in the United States. This production contains comedic, stylized violence and mild sexually suggestive content, and explores macroaggressions and colonialist narratives. If you would like additional information about anything listed here, please call our Box Office at 415.749.2228.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE FROM SHANNON R. DAVIS

The “Meta” Dilemma

This is a play about a play about political correctness in a rehearsal room gone amok. It's self-referential. Meta. Are we teetering between satire and harm? “I'm worried—is this going too far? But it's textual,” says one collaborator in our process. Another says, “Maybe we honor Natives in this scene, so it doesn't feel terrible.” With a satire written by a Native woman, do we dilute its messaging by whitewashing it?

Our design team is Indigenous. I'm Indigenous. I wonder how these conversations go in spaces (like in our play) with no Native voices. But our job is clear: honor the script, the people, and anchor the process in truth.

We start with interstitial scenes, the “educational PSAs.” It's in these scenes the satire becomes salient. How we learn about Thanksgiving, and relationally, Native Americans. Beginning in truth and laughing at the absurd, we harness something quintessentially Native: finding humor in our darkest moments.

“FastHorse's resistance to trivialize white people expresses a commitment to relationality that forms part of the groundwork for decolonizing such relationships.” deconstructcollective.com

The Process

Fulfilling our characters' boast, we embrace decentralized leadership, re-indigenizing our practice. Our performers engaged in the design and conceptual process; filming, choreographing, musicmaking, serving as their own technicians (a pandemic opportunity for growth). Prioritizing person over product is key. This means harnessing collective creativity and sharing responsibility, employing radical transparency. The product is nourishing when the process is. Laugh with us. Enjoy the complicated feelings. Lean into uncomfortability—there's growth there.

Miigwetch to the Ohlone—Miigwetch to all



LARISSA FASTHORSE
(Playwright) is an award-winning playwright from the Sicangu Lakota Nation and co-founder of the arts consulting firm Indigenous Directions. Her satirical comedy *The Thanksgiving Play* (Playwrights Horizons/Geffen Playhouse) was one of *American Theatre Magazine's* ten most

produced plays in 2019–2020. Additional works include *What Would Crazy Horse Do?* (Kansas City Repertory Theatre), *Landless*, *Cow Pie Bingo* (Alter Theater), *Average Family* (Children's Theater Company of Minneapolis), and *Teaching Disco Square Dancing to Our Elders: A Class Presentation* (Native Voices at the Autry). She is a recipient of the PEN/Laura Pels Theater Award, and multiple grants from the Ford Foundation and National Endowment for the Arts.



SHANNON R. DAVIS
(Director) is a proud descendant of Sami, Potawatomi, and Ojibwe people originally from Wisconsin. She is a Bay Area-based director, actor, and educator. Davis has an MFA in Directing and Acting from University of Wisconsin-Madison, has studied with The Moscow Art Theatre, and is the former Killian

Directing Fellow at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. She has worked with American Repertory Theatre, Ashland New Play Festival, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, California Shakespeare Theater, Children's Theater of Madison, New Native Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Playwrights Foundation, Shotgun Players, and Theatre Bay Area, among others. She is proud to lend her voice and lived experience to this show; acknowledging the land we are on, honoring the ancestors for their guidance, and thanking our Ohlone hosts.
shannonrdavis.com

PHOTO NOTICE

The videotaping or making of electronic or other audio and/or visual recordings of this production, or distributing recordings on any medium, including the internet, is strictly prohibited.

WHO'S WHO IN THE THANKSGIVING PLAY



ALLEN DARBY
Caden



MĀKENA MILLER
Alicia



RACHEL MORRISON
Logan



JOHNNY RICE
Jaxton

AN ACTOR'S NOTE—FROM ALLEN DARBY

In Conservatory hours over the last two years, my classmates and I have heard brilliant actors say some version of this speech: “Rehearsal was amazing! No wrong ideas! It was fantastic!” And I can say with authority that Shannon, our director, nurtured a space that did just that. We worked in a decolonized way where collaboration was key. My castmates and I have two years of intense actor training as a bedrock of trust. Our incredible designers, Ariella and Luis, and our terrific stage manager, Patrick, built on that trust and created an environment I hope to replicate in every rehearsal room I join in the future: silly and serious. Lastly, I never thought would I come up with a hip hop beat for a song about turkeys. But hey, that’s 2020.



PATRICK MAHONEY
Stage Manager



MORGAN BADILLO
Visual Designer



JESSIE AMOROSO
Costume Designer



ARIELLA COOLEY
Sound Designer



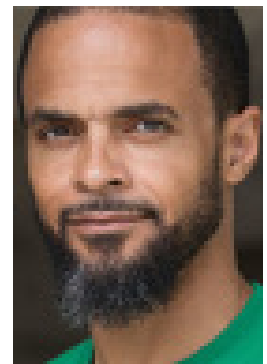
LUIS GARCIA
Video Designer



CHRISTINE ADAIRE
Faculty Voice
& Dialect Coach



LISA ANNE PORTER
Faculty Voice
& Dialect Coach



DANYON DAVIS
Faculty Movement Coach

READ MORE! GET ACT-SMART!

For More on Larissa FastHorse and *The Thanksgiving Play*:

Larissa FastHorse on the [career evolutions](#) that led her to playwriting.

In this [interview](#) with *The Interval*, FastHorse speaks about her reason for writing the play and her writing process.

FastHorse describes the play as being about “performative wokeness” and well-intentioned white people in this [video](#) by Playwrights Horizons, where *The Thanksgiving Play* had its New York premiere.

FastHorse in conversation with A.C.T. Artistic Director Pam MacKinnon and playwright Bruce Norris in our podcast [Place: Here. Time: Now.](#)

A member of the Sicangu Lakota Nation, FastHorse is a fierce advocate for the Native community. “I can’t be the last Native person in that door,” she says to playwright Bruce Norris in an interview with [American Theatre Magazine](#).

Further Reading:

[**A Conversation with Native Americans on Race**](#)

[**The First Thanksgiving: What Really Happened**](#)

[**Native American Girls Describe the REAL History Behind Thanksgiving | Teen Vogue**](#)

BuzzFeed’s [**I’m Native, But I’m Not...**](#)

Larissa FastHorse’s [website](#)

INTERVIEW EXCERPT:



Excerpt of an interview conducted by Howlround Theatre Commons with playwright Larissa FastHorse ([full content available here](#))

This play features primarily white actors—or POC passing as white, as noted in the casting. As someone who aims to bring Indigenous issues to light and provide roles for Indigenous actors, how have you negotiated this artistic choice?

Larissa FastHorse: I'm conflicted about it. I would much rather be able to write plays with Indigenous characters and have them be produced, but that's not American theatre right now.

I'm really fortunate that a lot of theatres commission me to write plays and they produce my plays, which is awesome. I'm really grateful I have a career as a playwright and a choreographer in this field. But the problem I have again and again is that my plays, after they're produced once, don't get additional productions. The number one reason I hear is because of casting; theatres claim they don't know any Indigenous actors or they cannot afford to bring in Indigenous actors. I believe that America is not done needing to hear about Indigenous issues and stories, but I didn't want to continue to fight; so I said, fine, I have two weeks of my fellowship, I'm going to write a play straight through that is entirely about Native American issues that does not necessarily use Native Americans. That's the challenge I put out for myself. Fortunately, I really like the play that resulted.

I won't stop, of course, writing plays with strong Indigenous characters; I have other plays that I continue to work on and commissions with Indigenous people. When I get a commission, the first thing I do is say, "Whose people were originally on this land?" To the theatre I say, "Let's talk about those people. What do you know about them? Have you engaged with that community? Do you know that community?" And so of course I would much rather be able to write whatever I want, but that's not the reality of American theatre. But I'm half white; I should be able to write about white people. So I'm honoring my white half for the first time.

POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

Discuss in class!

- What themes do you think this play is trying to highlight?
- Have you seen your community's story represented by people that are not from your community? How does this impact the story?
- What did you learn about the traditions, context, and controversies surrounding Thanksgiving from this play?
- What stories did you grow up hearing about Thanksgiving?
- What did you learn about the profession of theater and the conventions that exist in theater?
- Did you relate to any of the characters in the show? If so, why?
- If you'd create a play about Thanksgiving, who would your characters be and why?
- How did you feel watching an online live play? How did it compare to watching a play onstage?

POST SHOW ACTIVITIES

Write Your Thanksgiving Play!

This exercise could be conducted individually or in pairs or small groups.

Objective: For Students to individually or collectively write a scene inspired by the ideas presented in *The Thanksgiving Play*.

Step 1.

Pick a setting and 2-4 characters that will be in your play. For a sample, see playwright Larissa Fasthose's character/setting page below

CHARACTERS

LOGAN - Female, Caucasian looking, the high school drama teacher that's always pushing the envelope in potentially inappropriate ways. Earnest about theatre and proving herself.

JAXTON - Male, Caucasian looking, yoga practitioner/actor. Politically correct to a fault, a big one. He's that confident guy everyone loves, but his logical PC thinking takes weird turns.

ALICIA - Female, brunette, Caucasian looking but has looks that would have been cast as ethnic in 1950s movies. Without guile. Sexy and hot, but not bright.

CADEN - Male, Caucasian looking, the academic. Awkward elementary school history teacher with dramatic aspirations but no experience.

SETTING

A high school drama classroom anywhere but the Los Angeles area.

Theater Vocabulary

character: a person portrayed in a drama, novel, or other artistic piece.

setting: when and where the action of a play takes place.

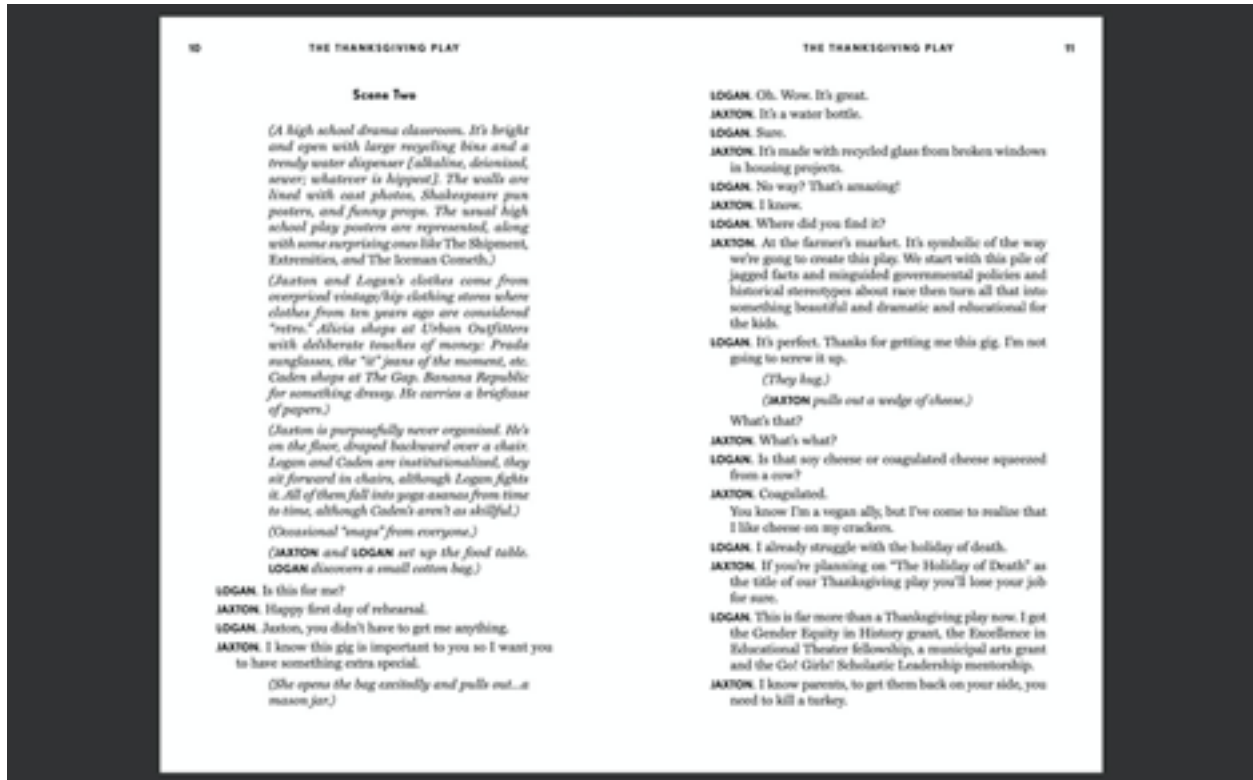
Step 2.

Write a scene using template below. Use the characters you chose. Notice how Larissa FastHorse sets the stage, highlights who is speaking, and offers stage directions to show us where the characters are and what they may be doing. Make sure your play has a clear introduction to characters and problem (every good play has a problem), rising action, and finally a resolution or clear ending.

Note to Teachers: These plays could be submitted as is, or better still, cast and read out aloud on a forum where peers can offer praise and feedback.

POST SHOW ACTIVITIES

Read a sample of the script of *The Thanksgiving Play* below.



For a Social Justice Focus

Ask your students to think about an aspect of social justice they'd like to highlight through their scene. Would they like to amplify minority voices in their scene, speak about the environmental impact of Thanksgiving meals, harmful thanksgiving traditions carried out in the media, neighborhoods, schools, etc?

We recommend reading [The Racial Justice Guide](#) to Thanksgiving and [Teaching Thanksgiving in a Socially Responsible Way](#) available at the Teaching Tolerance website or the [Environmental Impact of Thanksgiving Meals](#).

POST SHOW ACTIVITIES

Theater Vocabulary

Dialogue: spoken conversation used by two or more characters to express thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Stage directions are never spoken, but instead are clues that guide actors as they perform the text. Stage directions are usually in parenthesis and/or italics to distinguish them from the text that actors must speak.

Rising action: a series of events following the initial incident and leading up to the dramatic climax.

Resolution: how the problem or conflict in a drama is solved or concluded.

To learn more Theater Vocabulary, [click here](#).

Standards Addressed

National Core/Common Core Arts Standards

www.nationalartsstandards.org

Performing, Presenting:

Performing (Theater) Realizing artistic ideas and work through interpretation and presentation. Anchor Standard #6. Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

Connecting: Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.

Anchor Standard #10. Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

California Arts Standards

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/caartsstandards.pdf>

Anchor Standard 6: Convey Meaning Through the Presentation of Artistic Work
5.TH:Pr6

Share small-group drama/theatre work, with peers as audience.

How to Maximize Your Live Video Theater-Viewing Experience

By Ariana Johnson and Livian Yeh

Even though we can't gather in person, live theater can still happen! Thank you for gathering in this virtual space for Larissa FastHorse's *The Thanksgiving Play*. Below are a few tips to help maximize your live video theater-viewing experience.

Know that this is a new kind of theater

This isn't like in-person theater performances, or film and television. In livestreamed theater, both audience and artists meet in a digital space, where art is created live and in real time.

Embrace the medium

Keep an eye out for the characters' names, settings, and soundscapes. The artists worked hard to build a fully immersive virtual world despite physical distance.

Engage with the fellow audience

Once the show is running, there will be a chat function at the bottom of the screen, where you can converse with other audience members. Make sure you're sending chat messages to panelists AND attendees. We encourage you to exclaim, react, and applaud!

If possible, make sure you have a secure connection

Use a wired internet connection, or make sure you are close to your router if using Wi-Fi. If the connection is very laggy or slow, reduce the quality of the video or turn off Wi-Fi on unneeded devices.

For better sound/visuals

Use headphones (ideally wired) for optimal sound quality and watch in full screen.