

Roundabout Theatre Company

A Thousand Clowns

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Study Guide

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A Thousand Clowns

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Character Descriptions

Murray Burns (*mid-30's*): He is an unemployed writer and guardian of his nephew, Nick Burns. He is an arrogant maverick who refuses to conform to societal norms. As Herb Gardner stated, "Murray values a sense of humor in himself and others more than anything....The world keeps feeding Murray straight lines and Murray can't resist throwing back punch lines."

Nick Burns (*12*): He is the bright, precocious nephew of Murray Burns. He was abandoned by his mother, Murray's sister, at the age of six. Nick plays the "straight man" to Murray's comic role in their relationship.

Sandra Markowitz (*25*): She is an intense young woman who has recently finished graduate school. She is the emotional and psychological part of the social work team sent by the New York Bureau of Child Welfare to Murray's apartment.

Albert Amundson (*28*): He represents the other half of the social work team. He is straight as an arrow in temperament and in the script is referred to as a "middle-aged 28 year old." He plays a major role in the decision of whether Nick should be taken from Murray's home and placed into foster care.

Arnold Burns (*early 40's*): He is Murray's older brother and agent. He was once as rebellious as his brother, but is now settled with his family, work, and a steady salary.

Leo Herman: He plays the comic character Chuckles on the "Chuckles the Chipmunk Show." Murray quit writing for his show four months before the start of the play. Leo is neurotic and is constantly seeking approval. He wants Murray to return to work as a writer for his show.

Synopsis

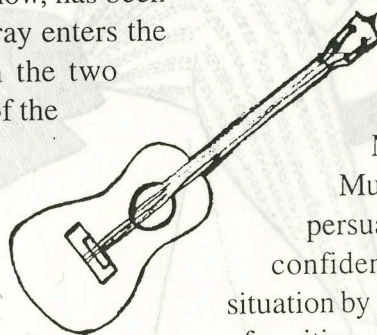
A Thousand Clowns takes place over the course of two days, in a one-room apartment on the Lower West Side of Manhattan.

Act I

The play opens in Murray Burns' apartment with Nick Burns, his twelve year old nephew, watching the "Chuckles the Chipmunk" show on TV. Murray, a former writer for the show, has been out of work for about five months. Murray enters the room and a discussion begins between the two characters. Nick is aware that members of the New York Bureau of Child Welfare will be paying a visit to their home to assess his living situation. Murray has neglected to respond to several inquiries, and Nick wants to discuss the possible ramifications of the investigation. Murray is idealistic and does not believe in conforming to societal pressures and the notion of the ideal family. He has his own ideas of how life and each individual person should be accepted and has encouraged Nick to think in the same way. However, Nick's maturity and

the threat of the Welfare Board's investigation leads to Nick's statement to Murray, "You want to be your own boss, but the trouble with that is you don't apply yourself to anything....For me as an actual child, the way you live in this house and we live is a dangerous thing for my later life when I become an actual person."

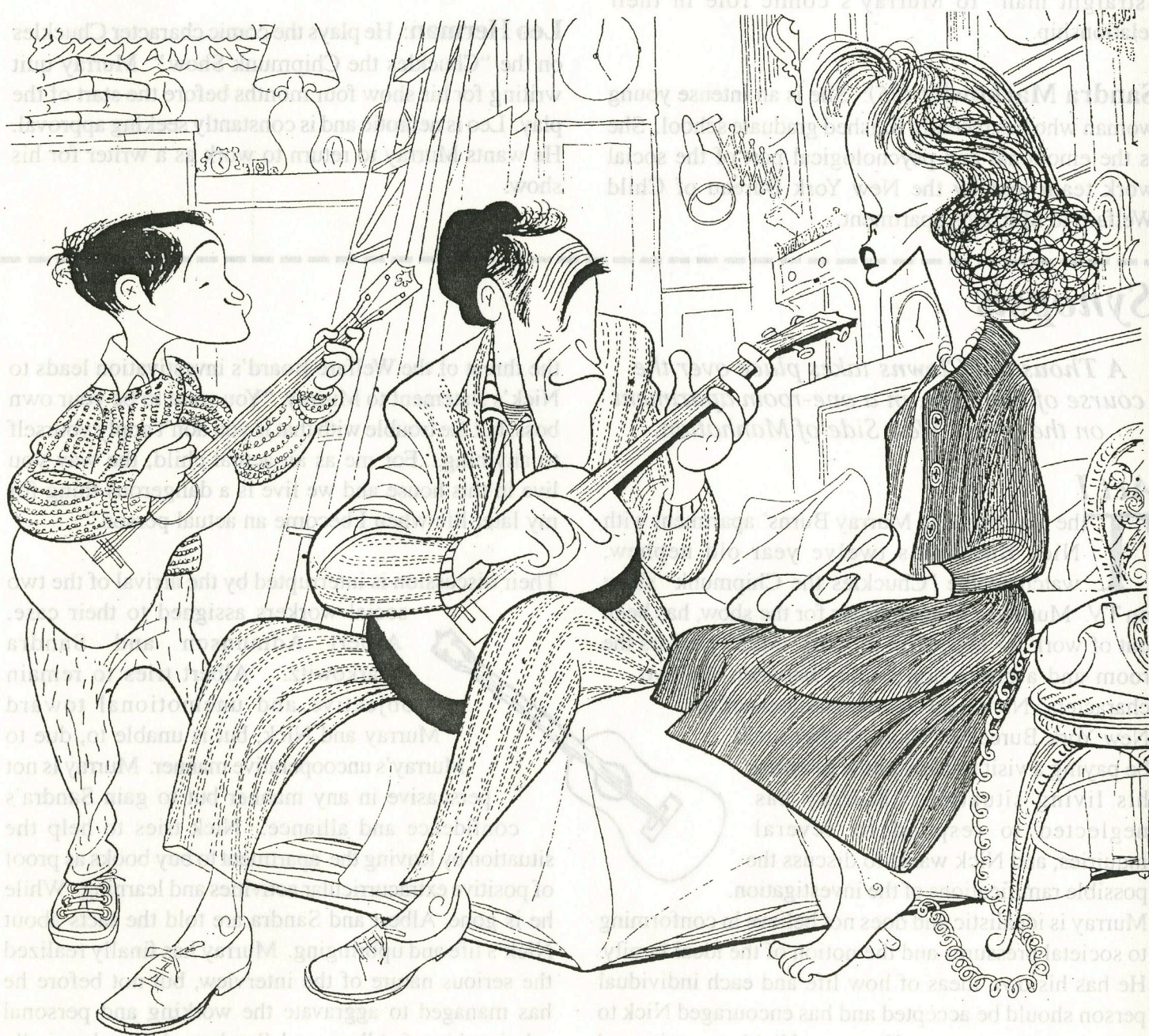
Their discussion is interrupted by the arrival of the two social workers assigned to their case. Albert Amundson and Sandra Markowitz. Albert tries to remain objective and unemotional toward Murray and Nick, but is unable to, due to Murray's uncooperative manner. Murray is not persuasive in any manner but to gain Sandra's confidence and alliance. Nick tries to help the situation by leaving the apartment to buy books as proof of positive extracurricular activities and learning. While he is gone, Albert and Sandra are told the facts about Nick's life and upbringing. Murray has finally realized the serious nature of the interview, but not before he has managed to aggravate the working and personal relationship of Albert and Sandra. Albert hurriedly



leaves for another case, taking with him a fairly negative impression of Murray and Nick's living situation, and Sandra remains in Murray's apartment at the risk of losing her job and her relationship with Albert. She has reached a point of tears and finds comfort and safety in Murray's apartment. Nick returns to find Albert gone, Sandra crying, and the situation worse than how he left it. Murray starts a rousing chorus of "Yes, Sir That's My Baby" on his ukulele and cajoles Nick into joining him. A smile is produced from Sandra, and Nick leaves the apartment via the fire escape to spend the night with the upstairs neighbor as Murray continues his serenade.

Act II

The Following morning, Sandra awakens in Murray's apartment with the realization that she feels more at home in that small space than in her own home. She is still "projecting a personality identification with the Statue of Liberty," as she had described herself the day before, "courageous and free and solid metal." She looks about the apartment and sets her sights on redecorating it. While she is asking Murray for an extra key to the apartment, Albert rings the doorbell. Sandra hides in the closet when she hears Albert's voice, and Murray ushers him in the door. Albert has returned to Murray's apartment to advise



Barry Gordon, Jason Robards, Jr. and Sandy Dennis in the original Broadway production in 1962.

him that action will be taken that week to remove Nick from his home and "the deprivation" Murray has caused him. Murray will have a chance to state his case to the Board on Thursday (two days later) to prove that there is "some substantial change in [his] circumstances, some evidence [the Board] is not aware of ; if he can demonstrate he is a responsible member of society."

Sandra comes out of the closet after Albert has left the apartment. Murray resolves that he must find a job and show the Board he is willing to change. He calls his brother, Arnold Burns, who is also his agent, and leaves a message that he is on his way to see him. He leaves Sandra to her plan of redecorating his apartment, and he is next seen in his brother's office. Murray needs to find job, but he is in conflict with the actual desire to work. He sits in Arnold's office and hears Leo Herman's (Chuckles the Chipmunk) voice over the speaker phone and cannot control his actions. He throws the phone into the garbage as Leo continues to speak, and leaves Arnold to straighten out the situation. Murray knows what he should do, but cannot commit himself to accept the consequences no matter how much he cares for Nick. He returns to his newly redecorated apartment to face Sandra who leaves him after realizing she cannot force him to do something which he does not want to do; even it does mean losing Nick to a foster home.

Act III

Murray has made an attempt to return his apartment to the state it was in before Sandra's work. Arnold enters and tells Murray that Leo will be coming over later that evening to discuss the job offer. The brothers' relationship reaches a climax in this scene when Arnold finally expresses his anger and emotion toward Murray. The two brothers care for each other, but their relationship has been one of provocation by Murray and calm acceptance by Arnold. Their communication has mainly

been contained through the fruit Arnold brings daily to Murray's apartment. Arnold believes that, unlike Murray, he is able to "deal with the available world." As he says, "I do not choose to shake it up but to live with it." He does not believe he is an exceptional man, but he is the best Arnold Burns he can be, and he will not apologize for that fact. Arnold leaves the apartment and it is time for Murray to make a choice as to how he will continue to live his life.

Nick enters the room and prepares to tell Murray he has decided upon a name for himself. His mother left him without a name, and Murray has let Nick try different names and choose one in time for his thirteenth birthday. Nick has chosen the name, Murray, and presents this to his uncle by showing him his new library card. Murray is flattered, but at the same time, shocked, and does not know what to do with this information. He realizes he has to make a formal acceptance of his responsibility of being a guardian to this child. Leo arrives just as the emotion in the room has reached a peak. Leo is egotistical and arrogant, yet he needs constant reassurance about his work and person. Murray shows the audience he is willing to work to fulfill Leo's needs and go

back to his job writing for his T.V. show, even though it is not something his heart or conscience quite wants. He loves and cares for Nick, and will fulfill what duties are necessary, even if the duties are done grudgingly. Nick does not accept Murray's position as easily and puts up a fight. Murray finally assumes the role of parent and Nick steps into his role of being a twelve year old boy who needs Murray as much as Murray needs him. Having confirmed Murray's employment, Leo leaves the apartment. Sandra returns and starts putting the apartment back in order. The three start to work on the apartment with the feeling that, "there are many wonderful tricks you can try with a one-room apartment, if you're willing to use your imagination." Imagination and hard work can also work wonders on individual people.

"I want to be sure he sees all the wild possibilities. I want him to know it's worth the trouble just to give the world a little goosing when you get the chance. And I want him to know the subtle, sneaky, important reason why he was born a human being and not a chair" - Murray

Herb Gardner - A Biography

Herb Gardner was born in 1934 in Brooklyn, NY. He attended P.S. 90 and High School of the Performing Arts. In his youth, he began his work in the theatre by selling lemonade and checking coats and hats in Broadway theatres. He studied sculpture and playwriting at Carnegie Institute of Technology for one year and then studied at Antioch College(Ohio) as an English major. Before starting his career as a playwright, Gardner had a number of different jobs, including working for display houses and scenery builders and working in a toy factory making molds for bunnies and walruses. He also worked as an illustrator in commercial arts jobs, before gaining recognition as the creator of the highly successful cartoon called the Nebbishes (*Nebbish is a Yiddish word meaning poor soul*), which beginning in 1958 was in a newspaper cartoon strip (60 papers), on greeting cards, ashtrays, and cocktail napkins. Using his financial success from his Nebbishes, Gardner was able to concentrate on writing. At the time, he was quoted as saying, "You might say that I have written *A Thousand Clowns* on a Nebbish Fellowship."

A Thousand Clowns, which premiered when he was a 27 year old "virtually unknown young playwright," was Gardner's first full-length play. It opened on Broadway on April 5, 1962 at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre. After seeing Jason Robards in *Toys in the Attic* on Broadway, Gardner decided that he would be the perfect actor to play the part of Murray Burns. Mr. Gardner, who had never met Mr. Robards, introduced himself one evening after the show, gave him a copy of the play and asked him to read it. Within three days, Robards agreed to take the role. *A Thousand Clowns* ran for more than a year and won Gardner recognition in the Variety Critics Poll as Outstanding New Playwright and was nominated

for a Tony Award for Best Play. For his film adaptation of *A Thousand Clowns*, which also starred Robards, he won the Best Screenplay Award from the Screenwriter's Guild as well as Academy Award nominations for Best Screenplay and Best Picture of the Year.

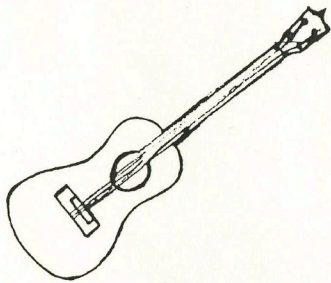
Mr. Gardner's other works include a novel, *A Piece of the Action*, and a number of full-length plays including *Conversations with My Father*, *The Goodbye People*, *Thieves* and *I'm Not Rappaport*, which won the 1986 Tony Award for Best Play and the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Play. His one-act plays include *How I Crossed the Street for the First Time All by Myself*, *The Forever Game*, and *I'm with Ya, Duke*. He also wrote the screenplays for *Thieves*; *The Goodbye People*, which he also directed; and *Who is Harry Kellerman and Why is He Saying Those Terrible Things About Me?*



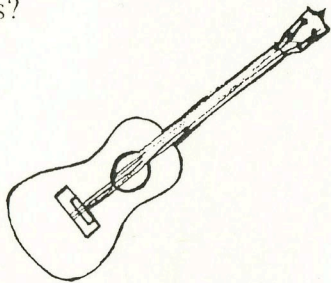
The Nebbish.

Projects and Activities

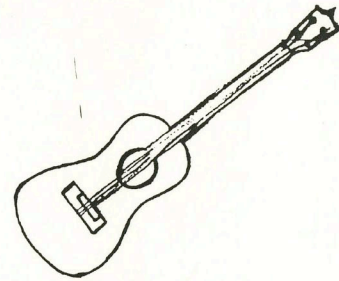
1 The idea for a play can be based on specific individuals, situations or a combination of both. *A Thousand Clowns*, for example, began in the playwright's mind without a thesis or theme, but with characters: a young boy reading want-ads to his uncle. Make a list of 5-10 different types of characters. They can be people you know, celebrities, public figures, or invented characters of your own. Write a few scenes combining the characters in different ways; for example, your grandmother and President Clinton...What could they discuss? What kind of situation might have brought them together? The scenes do not have to be realistic, so use your imagination and HAVE FUN!



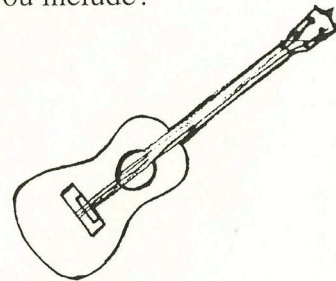
3 You have probably heard the expression, "Laughter is the best medicine." One of the distinguishing qualities of the character Murray Burns is that he always attempts to find the humor in a situation. Try to remember the last time that something or someone really made you laugh. What were the circumstances?



5 In the play, Murray Burns expresses to Sandra how great it is that there are all "these Sandras running around who you never met before...Like those little cars in the circus, this tiny red car comes out and putters around, suddenly its doors open and out come a thousand clowns..." Murray is remarking upon the different emotions, moods, likes, dislikes, and needs that each person has in their one body. Sit down with a member of your family or a friend and discuss all the different facets of yourself and personality that you think are housed within your body, like the thousand clowns in the circus car struggling to get out and join the world.



2 Many playwrights use personal experiences as inspiration for their plays. Think about the experiences you have had or people that have been important in your life. Make a timeline of your life including these important people, events, vacations, and places. Imagine you are given the task of constructing a time capsule that will describe these people and places. The time capsule will be buried this Summer, 1996 and will be dug up in 2096, 100 years from now. What items would you include?



4 The word *family* can mean different things to different people, as seen in *A Thousand Clowns* where Nick does not live in a "traditional" family. Families can include parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, pets, and so on. Draw a picture or make a collage that represents what *family* means to you.

