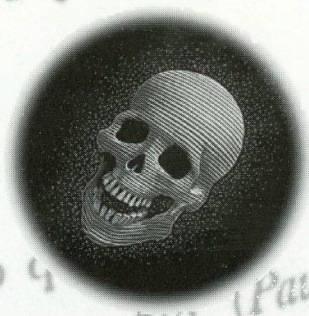


UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
AT ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY FEBRUARY 2001



A SKULL IN CONNEMARA



CRACKING M c D O N A G H ' S SKULL

DIRECTOR GORDON EDELSTEIN SHEDS LIGHT ON A DARK COMEDY

Somebody once said that the past is not really past, it's just as present as the present. I think that is basically what this play is about. The story centers on Mick Dowd, a pariah of the community, who is hired by the church every year to dig up the bones of the dead and make room in the cemetery. The issue of the play is that this year Mick is being asked to dig up the bones of his wife who died seven years ago. There was always a question of how his wife died and many people in town think that he killed her. The play never answers this question, but in forcing Mick to confront her bones, the driving force of the play quickly becomes a confrontation with what he may or may not have done. We are not even sure if he remembers what happened. So in a way, it's a play about being haunted by the unresolved issues and relationships of the past. It is also a play about guilt and memory, about trying to make peace with the

past in a place so crowded with dead that there isn't any room left for new graves.

One of the great paradoxes of Martin McDonagh is that when you read the work, you see it as the work of a young man - in its sense of humor and in how clearly it is influenced by his predecessors, such as David Mamet, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and J. M. Synge - and yet the work is 100 percent original. From Pinter and Beckett, he takes sensitivity to the musicality of language and the precise use of language as a tool of psychological violence. He seems to have taken license from Mamet to be brazenly testosterone driven - to be horrifyingly cruel while at the same time, hilarious. From Joe Orton, he takes an onstage violence with a particular dreamlike quality that you can't quite get your arms around. It's as if he ate and digested fully the lessons of these masters, their aesthetic and cultural offerings, took from it what he cared to, and created from it something utterly original.

Although McDonagh was raised in England, both his parents are Irish and he summers in Ireland. He definitely listened hard and well to stories being told and conversations being held in the pubs, on the streets, and in the post offices of Ireland, because he captures the cadence or music of western Irish speech impeccably. It is not authenticity he is after, however; rather he captures it and sculpts it and renders it into something that's non-realistic and a kind of parallel universe to our real world.

Ultimately, this play is a kind of bizarre, twisted mystery story that leaves us with more questions than it answers. We never really find out if Mick killed his wife or not, and we are left wondering about all sorts of things. We wonder what is going to happen to Thomas when he leaves the stage. We wonder why Maryjohnny continues to associate with Mick in the face of what he seems to have done. We wonder if these characters are doomed to remain stuck in the quicksand of Connemara. ■

GETTING INTO CHARACTER

- WITH GORDON EDELSTEIN -



Director Gordon Edelstein (l) with actor Kevin Tighe (r)

Photo: Melanie Grizzet

MICK DOWD

(played by Kevin Tighe): A kind of lonely, independent, odd man who has a horrifyingly violent streak as well as a very gentle streak. People in town want to stay away from him. He has odd jobs here and there. He's on the public dole to a certain extent. He drinks and he's very lonely.

MARYJOHNNY RAFFERTY

(played by Zoanne LeRoy): One of the town's biggest mooches and gossips. Tom and Mairtin's grandmother, she imagines herself religious and moral but is actually quite a hypocrite in that regard. She's a bit of a drunk and goes to Mick's house to mooch poteen, which is basically moonshine.

MAIRTIN HANLON

(played by Christopher Carley): A teenager with nothing to do but get in trouble. Not a bad kid, but cheeky, disrespectful. He fancies himself rather smart, but is really clueless. He's very funny and much of the humor of the play is at his expense.

THOMAS HANLON

(played by Christopher Evan Welch): Mairtin's older brother. A local policeman who is very ambitious and very anxious to get out of Connemara. He fancies himself a smart, cool, powerful detective but none of those things are true. His images of police detective work come from second-rate American TV shows. This makes him somewhat absurd. No one in town takes him seriously, but they have to listen to him because he is a cop. He is very foolish and very funny.

UPSTAGE

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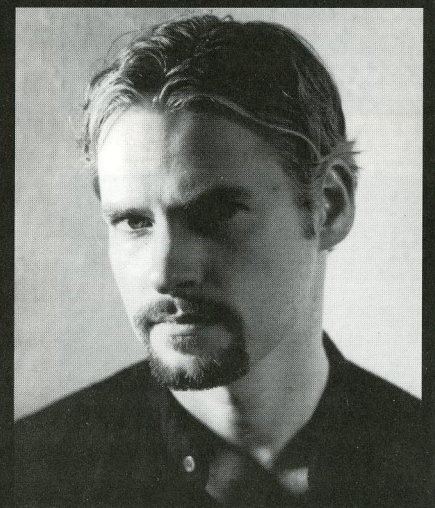
TIM McCANNA
Design

THE LEENANE TRILOGY

The Beauty Queen of Leenane

A Skull in Connemara

The Lonesome West

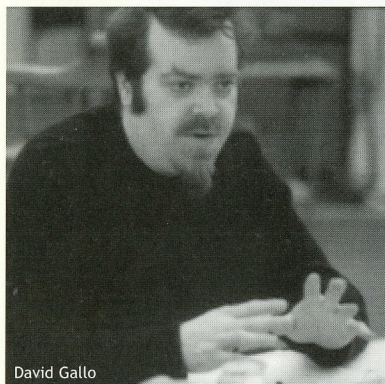


Martin McDonagh

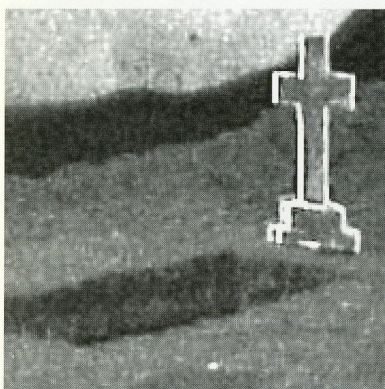
Photo: Simon Annand

DAVID GALLO DIGS

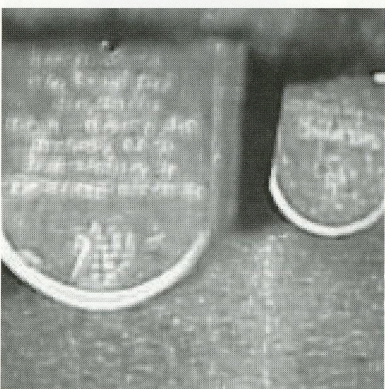
Q & A WITH THE SET



David Gallo
Photo: Melanie Grizzel



“Connemara is an especially barren place - a big rock basically - with no place to bury the dead.”
-David Gallo

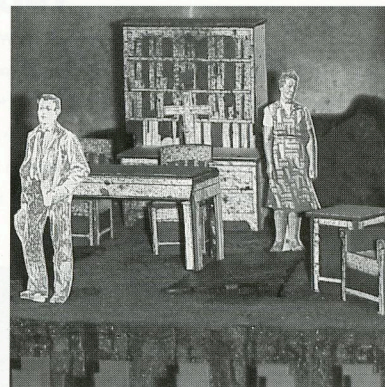


WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF A DESIGNER'S JOB?

GALLO: My belief is that the designer's job is to support the director's vision of the material. I serve the director first; the director in turn serves the play. I need to create a physical environment in which the director's vision of the play can take place. Often, directors don't speak in visual terms, so my job becomes trying to understand what the director wants to convey and turning that into a physical world that helps tell the story.

WHY DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

GALLO: I think Martin McDonagh's craft is astonishing, especially for such a young person. I wanted to work on a piece with someone who I felt had a similar aesthetic to myself, which is to create something that is poignant and humorous while at the same time being basically really sick. This is a dark and sacrilegious play, and when I first read it, I laughed like I've never laughed before. I thought it was hysterical. Usually when I work on a play, I read the script a limited number of times, but this play I would read just for laughs. It's very black humor and the characters are way out there. I think the character of Mairtin is absolutely hysterical, especially with the things that come out of his mouth that he actually thinks people are going to believe or understand. And the police officer is essentially a crossing guard for school kids, yet he imagines himself some kind of super cop from something out of



the movies. But then you get past that and recognize that these people seem odd and not too bright because they exist in their own universe, which is something we tried to make clear with the set design.

HOW DO YOU GET FROM READING A SCRIPT TO WHAT THE SET SHOULD LOOK LIKE?

GALLO: It depends on the piece. Sometimes the visual just pops into your head. This one was relatively clear from the beginning. It wanted to have a Beckett-like quality: darkness and strangeness. The director, Gordon Edelstein, talked about the Beckett influence and the similarities to Shakespeare's gravedigger scene from *Hamlet*. We also talked about the

influences from second-rate horror movies or a fun house that can be a scene in the play. But mostly, we talked about the characters - about how they seem trapped in a place that people seem to want to get away from. We also talked about the fact that Connemara is an especially barren place - a big rock basically - with no place to bury the dead.

It was very important to Gordon that the world we created on stage feel like a separate place, that the play take place in its own universe. Even though the main character has next door neighbors, we wanted the sense that he was very isolated on his own island and to go there would be a journey. The platform we created for the stage is meant to feel like a chunk of land floating in space, and there is a deliberate separation between the ground and the sky. The only way to get into this place is to cross over one of two bridges.

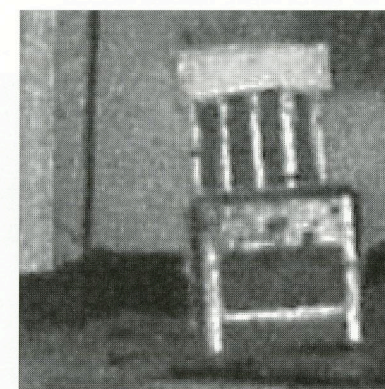
GRAVES

DESIGNER OF SKULL

Another thing that was important to us was the fact that, although the play is very much a comedy, it is also a ghost story. We wanted to get a sense of scary confinement or entrapment. We wanted it to be a place where the characters are confronted by ghosts all around them, a place where they are unable to escape from the spirits of generations upon generations that have come before.

WHAT KIND OF RESEARCH DID YOU DO FOR THIS PLAY?

GALLO: Research material was largely about the reality of the place. I looked at books and travel guides, and my sister actually goes there once a year and takes pictures, so I used a lot of those. The most telling pictures that I looked at were a few that captured the essence of Connemara without a lot of detail - a couple of arty, grainy, black and white photos. I wanted to use the real elements of rock and sky, but with a bit of a twist. The right atmosphere is more important than getting the right color rock. It's not about replicating reality, it's about finding something that visually and hopefully metaphorically helps to tell the story.



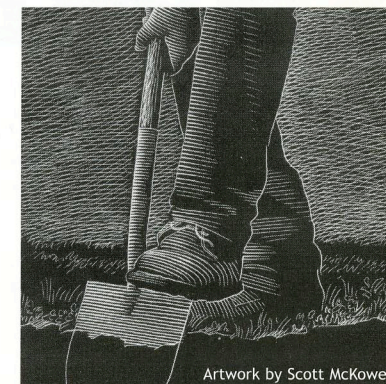
WHAT ARE YOUR MOST ESSENTIAL TOOLS AS A SET DESIGNER AND HOW DO YOU USE THEM TO CONVEY A VISUAL STORY?

GALLO: A lot of it is in how you divide the space, how you carve up the real estate you are given. For example, with this play I wanted to create a sense of expansiveness in a relatively small theatre, so I actually used very little of the space and created a drop that is a very dark color to surround the set. This way we will be able to get the sense of expansive space that we were looking for by the way we light it.

Color choices are very important for set design because of the mood they convey. I designed this play with a very subdued palette. Even though there is a lot of color in Ireland, we felt that we should de-emphasize it, so even though there are brightly colored objects on stage, they are all muddied down.

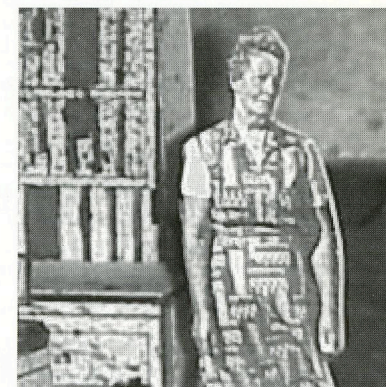
Texture is another major element we work with. The textures for this play wanted to be rough. Whether this man would really have a dirt floor is not important. The choice, the roughness of the texture, works both for his cabin and the graveyard, but also tells part of the story. This character is a farmer and a gravedigger. In many ways he is a man of the earth. What better way to say that then to have him mired in it?

Ultimately, we wanted to create the impression that the story is actually taking place in the graveyard. We never get away from the idea of it, even though only one scene actually happens there. To me, the metaphor of the graveyard represents the reality of this man's life. He is in many ways a pariah of his community and he is continually confronted by the dead. ■



Artwork by Scott McKowen

“In many ways he is a man of the earth. What better way to say that than to have him mired in it?”
-David Gallo



Photos of David Gallo's set model for *A Skull in Connemara*

SHPEAKIN UHYRISH

WITH STEPHEN GABIS DIALECT COACH



I'm what is called a dialect coach. I am basically paid for my ear. My job is to be an expert in different forms of the English language, different ways that the sounds change, and the history of how one sound has changed to another sound because of the migration of people from the British Isles. It's quite fascinating work, because each playwright writes with a certain music in mind. Some playwrights will almost torture you by being quite specific in the way they spell out how they want a word to sound.

more different breakdowns themselves. You've got the Ulster, which is the northern one, Benster which is southeast, Munster which is Cork, and Knaught to the west. In this play we are in the province of Knaught which is pronounced "connet." So when you read these plays, depending on the part of Ireland the characters are from, you'll see all kinds of different pronunciations and strange syntax situations. Most particularly in the west, you see things like "Well, I do be goin' here so," and "I told you that now. Haven't I not had to tell you that?" Well, this occurs because English was first

Yeats always said, "You English invaded us and thrust your language upon us, and what did we do but re-interpret your language for you." I think he was talking about how the Irish infused the English language with qualities of their own manner of talking. Qualities of the Irish language they retained include the ability to change the meaning of words with a slight change of stress, and their roundabout way of saying things. In the Irish language, for example, you cannot say "I love you" directly; you go way around it and say something like, "It is to you I will be giving much love." They also use language

THE THING TO KEEP IN MIND ABOUT THE IRISH ACCENTS IS THAT ENGLISH IS A SECOND LANGUAGE FOR THE IRISH PEOPLE.

We dialect coaches use the International Phonetic Alphabet, which is a strange looking half-Greek, half-ancient Irish shorthand to record certain sounds. But playwrights don't use that alphabet. They use their own strange spellings. For example, for his characters from Delta Mississippi, Tennessee Williams spells "on" as "awn." So I am the person that the actors confer with to figure out how it should sound.

The thing to keep in mind about the Irish accents is that English is a second language for the Irish people. Irish is one of many Gaelic languages. There are Scots, Welsh, Isle of Mann and Cornish dialects, and then the Irish. The Irish then have

introduced to Ireland, not by any desire of the Irish, thank you very much, but by the invasions of Henry II. So we are talking around the 1100's. The English that was thrust down the Irish throat in those days was Middle English. Then, eventually Elizabethan English came on top of that. Meanwhile, the Irish people were still using their own language until the 18th century, when it was outlawed. But in remote places such as Connemara, the Irish language hung on. I know a playwright who grew up in this area and didn't speak English until he was about 11. They didn't even have electricity until he was about five. And no TV until he was in his late teens or so. He is only in his forties now, so we are talking about a very remote area.

as a weapon. They can cut you to ribbons and you don't even know what's happening to you, they are so linguistically sly about it. You'll see a lot of that in this play.

You'll also notice some syntax situations such as "I be goin' here now," that are similar to the African-American dialects that come out of the Caribbean. This comes from the fact that often the foremen of the plantations were Irish indentured servants. You can also hear that influence in the rise and fall of the Jamaican dialect and the open sound of the vowels. It comes from actually learning to speak English from the Irish. So the Irish people and the African-American people are joined at the hip linguistically.

SPEAK AS IF YOU COME FROM CONNEMARA

(IN FIVE EASY STEPS)

Read a few lines from a Martin McDonagh play.

IF YOU REMEMBER TO:

1 **STRESS THE CONSONANTS**, especially the l's and r's, as in "we will let fair pat pass." Also, change your "s" sounds as in "speak" to "sh" as in "shpeak."

2 **MOVE YOUR TONGUE DOWN A BIT** when you say your middle vowels, so "stir" and "cup" sound like "shtuhr" and "coop".

3 **CHANGE THE "A" SOUND** as in "father" into the "a" sound from "cat". This is where the Bostonian pronunciation of "park the car in the Harvard yard" comes from, only the Bostonians also drop the middle r.

4 **WHEN YOU GET TO YOUR DIPHTHONGS**, where two vowel sounds blend together, such as "a-e" as in "pay", "oy" as in "boy", and "ow" as in "now", make the following changes:

A. **STRETCH OUT THE "A-E"** so it just becomes a bit longer, so "pay" becomes "paaee."

B. **CHANGE THE "OY" TO THE "IE" SOUND**, so "boy" becomes "bie."

C. **PRONOUNCE THE "OW" SOUND "O"**, so "now" becomes "no."

5 **DROP THE "G" OFF -ING ENDINGS** and add the words "so," "like," "sure" or "now" to the end of phrases, as in "We're goin' round to the pub for a beer, like," and "I do be goin' now, sure."

**YOU'LL BE SHPEAKIN
UHYRISH, SURE!**

THINKTHEATRE

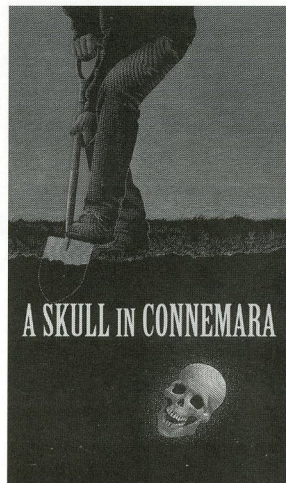
To get the most out of your upcoming trip to the theatre to see *A Skull in Connemara*, look over the following questions and discuss them with your family or classmates.

BEFORE YOU GO:

- ◆ How is your past part of your present? How do the ideas, thoughts and memories of former friends, teachers and relatives affect your life on a regular basis?
- ◆ What are some of the different American dialects you are accustomed to hearing? How do they differ in both pronunciation (how words are spoken) and syntax (how words are arranged in a sentence)?
- ◆ What are some places that you've been to that you would describe as "confining"? What about any "expansive places"?

AS YOU WATCH THE PLAY:

- ◆ Do you hear the characters speaking in the Connemara dialect (as described in this study guide) specifically? How does the dialect you hear resemble other dialects you're familiar with?
- ◆ How do the actors capture both the humor and the haunting qualities of this play? What do you notice in particular about each character? Do they change their physical movement or vocal delivery to emphasize humor or to create a frightening mood?
- ◆ What are some of the specific examples of color and texture choices in the settings, costumes and lighting that the designers used to convey the ideas of "expansiveness" and "confinement"?



Artwork by Scott McKowen

AFTER YOU SEE IT:

- ◆ Share your experience with the play. What surprised you about the play? Which characters did you identify with, and why? What were the most memorable aspects of the production? What does this play make you think about?
- ◆ How does this play resemble and differ from other literary works (other plays, poems, books, etc.) that you have read, in its presentation and its theme? How do you see connections with this play and other writers you are familiar with based on its style or literary technique?

PROJECT IDEAS:

- ◆ Imagine setting the play in another theatre space, perhaps in a much larger auditorium or a theatre in the round. Or choose another medium, say television or film. What new design choices would be available to you? How could a designer of sets, costumes or lights reinforce the ideas of the play given this different situation? Create a drawing, a collage or a written description detailing your ideas for a new production.
- ◆ How does one write in a dialect? Choose a phrase or sentence from a dialect you're familiar with. Create a new alphabet, or use your knowledge of English (and maybe other languages), to create phonetic spellings of that phrase. Share your written dialect with friends and family to see if they can speak your written dialect properly. Example: "Fuggeddabowdit!"

www.roundabouttheatre.org

Be sure to check out Roundabout's website for more information on this production, the rest of our season and all of Roundabout's activities.

WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

TICKET POLICY

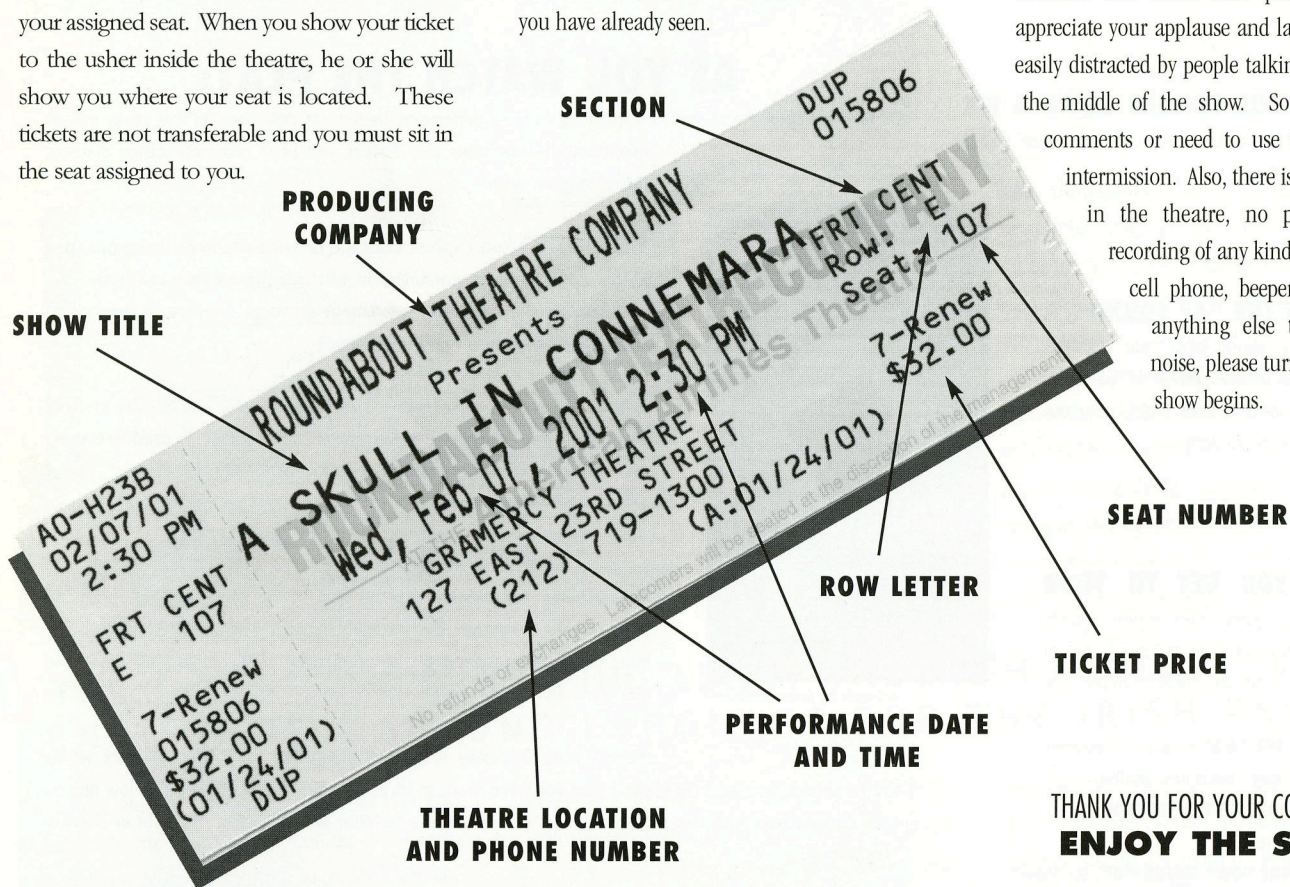
As a student participant in **Page To Stage** or **Theatre Access**, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films; perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION.
ENJOY THE SHOW!

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