



THE HUMANS

BY
STEPHEN KARAM

DIRECTED BY
JOE MANTELLO

**ROUNDAABOUT
THEATRE
COMPANY**

**50
YRS**

UPSTAGE GUIDE

A publication of **EDUCATION AT
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The Humans

Breaking with tradition, Erik Blake has brought his Pennsylvania family to celebrate Thanksgiving at his daughter's apartment in lower Manhattan. As darkness falls outside the ramshackle pre-war duplex, eerie things start to go bump in the night. Soon, family tensions reach a boiling point... and the hilarity, heart and horrors of the Blake clan are exposed.

a note from Artistic Director Todd Haines

What Stephen does so beautifully in this play, and in all of his work, is to find subtle ways to make us acutely aware of what lurks beneath seemingly normal events. He's getting at something that, like it or not, drives us all in one way or another: fear. Touching on class, health, love, religion, loneliness, aging, and so much more, Stephen has created a world in which we see deeply complicated people at both their best and their worst, sharing an immense capacity for humor and the immense tolerance for pain required to keep moving forward in any ordinary life. These characters feel like people you know incredibly well, and yet they are written with such loving nuance that they simultaneously feel completely unique.

when

Present Day

where

A turn-of-the-century ground floor/
basement duplex tenement apartment in
New York City's Chinatown.

who

Erik Blake - 60; patriarch of
the Blake family

Deirdre Blake - 61; Erik's wife

Aimee Blake - 34; their daughter

Brigid Blake - 26; their
daughter

Richard - 38; Brigid's boyfriend

Fiona "Momo" Blake - 79; Erik's
mother

PIG FACTS

The Humans features an item taken from real life, known as the Peppermint Pig. Peppermint Pigs evolved from *Glücksschwein* ("lucky pig"). *Glücksschwein* are made of marzipan and given at New Year's in Germany. Versions of the marzipan pig also appear in Scandinavian Christmas and New Year's traditions. Legend holds that pigs are lucky in Germany because in old-style decks of playing cards the ace was known as "the sow," a female pig. If you "had the sow," you were lucky.

Today, the Pig is a piece of candy crafted primarily by Saratoga Sweets in upstate New York. In a tradition for that region dating back to the 1880s, many family holiday celebrations would include passing the candy pig around the table, with each person present giving him a crack with a small nickel-plated mallet and then eating a piece of the peppermint for good luck. Some people smash the pig at Thanksgiving, as the family does in *The Humans*, accompanying their crack with a statement of what they're thankful for, though others save it for Christmas or New Year's Eve. Throughout this UPSTAGE Guide, look for images of the Peppermint Pig, with more facts to share about this wonderful tradition.



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INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT STEPHEN KARAM

Education dramaturg Ted Sod spoke with playwright Stephen Karam about *The Humans*.

TED SOD: *The Humans* is the third play of yours to be produced at Roundabout. Previously, we have presented *Speech & Debate* at Roundabout Underground and *Sons of the Prophet* on the Pels stage in the Steinberg Center. What do you find exciting about having your work produced here? Do you consider Roundabout your artistic home?

STEPHEN KARAM: Yes, it's been special to have Roundabout's support. The best part of returning to the Laura Pels is that I get work with many of the same people—and that feels like coming home.

TS: What was your inspiration for writing *The Humans*? What do you think the play is about?

SK: I was thinking a lot about fear and anxiety. The ways human beings cope with their fears. Fear in our culture and fear at home.

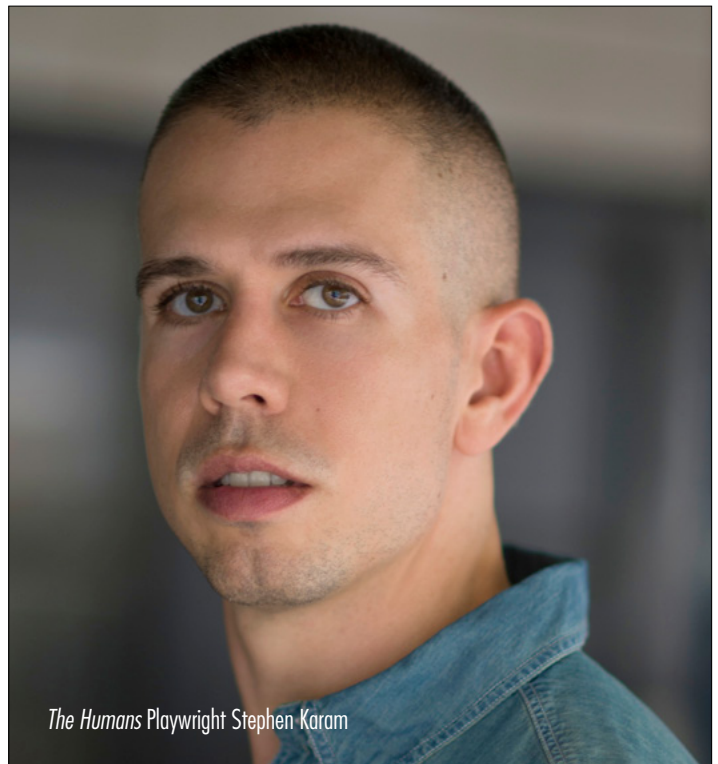
I wanted to try and locate the black pit of dread and malaise Americans have been trying to climb out of post-9/11 and post-financial-crisis. I had no idea how to do this. I wanted to write about those things...without literally writing about them. I didn't want to write a play about literal fear or 9/11 or the financial crisis. I was stuck. So I read to get inspired.

Lorca's writing about lower Manhattan (where I live) was a help. In the wake of the 1929 stock market crash, Lorca wandered around the financial district in New York and managed to capture the thick, grotesque terror that hung the air; he found disturbing and unfamiliar ways of describing very familiar scenes:

The terrible, cold, cruel part is Wall Street. Rivers of gold flow there from all over the earth, and death comes with it. There, as nowhere else, you feel a total absence of the spirit: herds of men who cannot count past three, herds more who cannot get past six, scorn for pure science and demoniacal respect for the present. And the terrible thing is that the crowd that fills this street believes the world will always be the same, and that it is their duty to keep that huge machine running, day and night, forever.

I became interested in his ability to take a familiar thing—Wall Street, the landscape of the financial district—and make it strange. Unfamiliar. (This seems connected to Shklovsky's idea of *defamiliarization*—read "Art as Technique")

If you are willing to follow me down this wormhole...all of the above reminded me of an essay I read in college: Freud's *The Uncanny*. In it, Freud ponders the question: why do certain stories inspire a deeper, more unsettling kind of creeping horror and uncanny feeling than others? I'm particularly obsessed with his use of etymology to unpack this question:



The Humans Playwright Stephen Karam

The subject of the "uncanny"...belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror... The German word [for "uncanny"], unheimlich, is obviously the opposite of heimlich, meaning "familiar," "native," "belonging to the home"; and we are tempted to conclude that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar... [But] among its different shades of meaning the word heimlich exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, unheimlich... on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight..."

He goes on to mention the possible notion that "...everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light."

I thought about the way the big human fears surface in various people—how no matter how hard we repress them, they eventually creep into the light, sometimes in fantastic disguises.

I thought it would be a challenge to try and write a play about these topics in a manner that might slowly generate the thing it was exploring...a kind of dread. Not in a genre-way, not per a pure thriller like *Deathtrap*, for example (and I do love a thriller)—but by watching human behavior, which is always what I'm most interested in.

It may seem comical that all of this thought resulted in something so simple: a story about a family having dinner. But I do think all

“I THOUGHT ABOUT THE WAY THE BIG HUMAN FEARS SURFACE IN VARIOUS PEOPLE – HOW NO MATTER HOW HARD WE REPRESS THEM, THEY EVENTUALLY CREEP INTO THE LIGHT, SOMETIMES IN FANTASTIC DISGUISES.”

of my musings and obsessions are buried deep beneath the play’s purposefully banal premise. I wanted to warp something familiar. But also pay tribute to the tradition of the family play.

TS: Can you tell us about the development process for this play? I believe there were several readings of the play and it was produced in Chicago last year.

SK: Yes, a few readings. American Theater Company produced a wonderful world premiere production in Chicago. Low budget, high quality. Chicago is a special place to launch new work. The ensemble of actors was wonderful. I was lucky to have them, and to have PJ Paparelli head that process. PJ was able to produce the play at ATC with Roundabout’s blessing, which meant a lot. PJ passed away this year; he was only 40. I’m still processing that loss, I can’t believe he’s gone.

TS: How did the play evolve over time? What was the catalyst for any rewriting you did?

SK: I’m starting to appreciate that everyone—if asked—would tailor a new play a little differently based on their proclivities/interests/background. And that’s okay. So as playwrights, as poets, we have to look to ourselves, listen to our guts for the final answers about what changes to make. Everyone will always have ideas about how to make your work better. Everyone has advice about how to end your play differently. Start it differently. And it’s not about right or wrong. At the end of the day, it’s your baby and you know what’s best.

With *The Humans*, I’ve found that because it’s related to very familiar forms—the family play and the thriller, almost a genre-collision play—some people want it to be one or the other. Either less dark and more of a family comedy. Or a full fledged thriller with blood and ghosts jumping out of closets. Everyone’s taste is different. But I think the best way to defend against regrets after opening night is to try your best to tell the story you want to tell.

In terms of smaller changes over time, I think good plays are like poems. Every syllable counts. So I wrestle with word choice, rhythm in final drafts. I think you have to be ruthless. I’m still learning so much with every play I write.

TS: This play is very intricately written. The audience watches the action in an upstairs/downstairs or split screen fashion. How did that concept come about? Was it difficult to keep track of what was happening when, since you are juggling multiple storylines and simultaneous conversations?

SK: I built a crude version of the apartment in my mind before writing the play, so the architecture existed in broad strokes. I enjoyed creating the *mise en scène* that grows out of a two-level, four room image. I like writing from that visual place.

Hopefully the telling of the story in real-time, in several rooms and without blackouts, giving the audience a “dollhouse” view of the

entire proceedings, allowing their eyes to wander to any room at any moment...hopefully this subconsciously adds to the experience of something deeply traditional...but a bit more queer...

TS: *The Humans* takes place during a Thanksgiving meal. Do you think holidays bring out the worst in family behavior?

SK: I have no idea. I can, however, talk about the behavior of the family?

As an epigraph, I have—somewhat tongue-in-cheek—adopted a list from a self-help book. It had the ludicrous title, *Think and Grow Rich* (the joke is on me, I learned it was a bestseller). I thought it had a nice interplay with the family’s deep-seated, repressed fear of poverty. And in the book, the following passage appears:

There are six basic fears, with some combination of which every human suffers at one time or another ...

*The fear of POVERTY
The fear of CRITICISM
The fear of ILL HEALTH
The fear of LOSS OF LOVE OF SOMEONE
The fear of OLD AGE
The fear of DEATH”*

—Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich*

I used each of these fears to anchor each of the characters. Murder mystery style. It’s not difficult to guess who is most deeply connected to each fear...

In building the family, being reductive was helpful in brainstorming; before layering, before adding complexity.

TS: What is it like working with director Joe Mantello?

SK: I love working with Joe. He’s been a real gift to this process. Someone with his career could rest on his laurels, but Joe is about the most detail-oriented, hard-working, passionate artist I’ve been lucky enough to work with. He understands and respects writers.

I think the best directors aren’t afraid to ask questions. And Joe asks great questions. He strives to get the best work out of everyone. I love that fight. I love his work ethic.

TS: What other projects are you currently working on?

SK: A new play. •



PIG FACT!

Peppermint Pigs are made of sugar, corn syrup, water, peppermint oil, and natural and artificial coloring. They taste like candy canes.

NEW YORK AS A CHARACTER

The apartment we see in *The Humans* is unremarkable. Barely moved into and utterly undecorated, with an occasional cockroach, stuttering lightbulbs, and squeaking floors, it's best qualities are its single "big window," ample square footage, and presumably affordable rent. Yet despite its outwardly pedestrian qualities, the apartment tells a highly specific story about New York. The city's everyday quirks (the incessant noise, the peacefully coexistent vermin, the relentlessly competitive real estate market) and history both recent and past are inextricable from the fabric of the play. With each floor creak and washing-machine rumble, the city asserts itself, a kind of seventh character present at this bizarre Thanksgiving dinner. Below, a character breakdown of New York, as seen in *The Humans*.

Setting: A turn-of-the-century ground floor/basement duplex tenement apartment in New York City's Chinatown...The apartment's pre-war features have been coated in layers of faded off-white paint, rendering the space curiously monotone.

Ground floor/basement duplex spaces like Brigid and Rich's are legal as long as all bedrooms are on the above-ground floor (though a room must have a window to be considered a legal bedroom in NYC; unless Brigid and Rich are planning to sleep in the living room, their landlord is in sketchy territory). Basement-duplex units have been growing in popularity thanks to their relative affordability; cellar space is 30-50% cheaper per square foot than above-ground floors. On the upper end of the real estate market, cellars can be a commodity space, the perfect location for swimming pools, bars, and screening rooms.

Brigid and Rich's **lower level** represents a contested space in the city's real estate market. Cellar apartments, aka "Accessory Dwelling Units" (so called if more than 50% of the space is below ground), are illegal in New York, though over 100,000 ADUs are currently occupied across the five boroughs. Historically, these basement spaces have been attractive to new immigrants short on money, but the affordability can come at a price (including poor ventilation, no windows, no emergency exits, and unsanitary conditions). Unfortunately, residents living in unsafe, unregulated spaces have little recourse, as reporting a safety violation is most likely to result in eviction. Though renovated basement dwellings could offer valuable units to the city's housing crisis, converting a cellar to a legal apartment is a lengthy and expensive process. In order for more ADUs to be converted to livable spaces, the city will need to decrease red tape and increase tax incentives.

"...my Grandma almost lost her life in a fire 'cause her bosses locked the doors to her factory to keep 'em from takin' breaks, coupla blocks from here..."

—Erik

On March 25, 1911, 145 of the young female workers (most of them immigrants) in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory were killed in a fire. Their deaths were largely preventable, but a lack of basic safety features (only one operational elevator, a tiny fire escape, only one unlocked exit door, and no sprinkler system or working hose) created the worst possible conditions for the fire. Many of the workers burned or were asphyxiated inside; others died when they attempted to jump down the elevator shaft or out of the windows to escape the flames.

The factory's name has stuck as one of the most notorious sweatshops in American history, and the fire had a galvanizing effect on labor reform in the city.

"The whole building groans at times... we have two sets of ear plugs."

—Richard

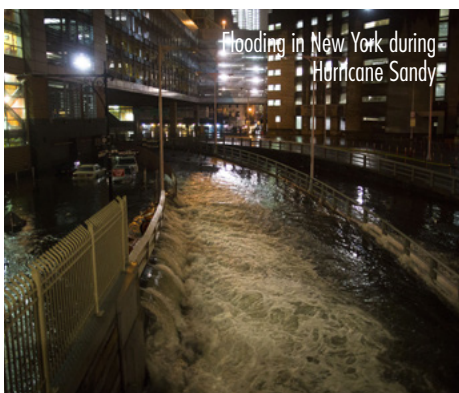
The world of *The Humans* is filled with mysterious and irritating noises: a clomping upstairs neighbor, creakingly thin floors, a rumbling trash compacter, clanking pipes, roiling laundry. Noise pollution is a major problem in New York. Despite many ordinances to keep noise under control (even ice cream trucks can be fined if their jingles play for more than ten seconds every ten minutes within a city block), noise is still the number one reason for calls on the city's 311 line, the hotline for questions and complaints within the five boroughs. Noise complaints have topped the call list every year since 311's inception in 2003, with more than 3.4 million noise-related calls to date.

"...I hate that you're moving a few blocks from where two towers got blown-up and in a major flood zone..."

—Erik

The **September 11th, 2001** terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center play a significant role in the history of the Blake family. 2,753 people were killed at the World Trade Center site in the attacks, in which two hijacked passenger jets were steered into the Twin Towers. The planes crashed into the Towers within a twenty-minute period, and in less than two hours, both towers had collapsed, leaving thousands trapped inside. Hundreds of first responders died throughout the rescue efforts; in the years following, thousands more have died or become ill from health-related aftereffects. Two

other jetliners were also part of the attacks: one crashed into the Pentagon, and the other, diverted from its target by the passengers onboard, crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. A terrorist group known as al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attack, sparking the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom.



Brigid's apartment lies in a **Zone A Flood Zone**, meaning that her apartment is in a low-elevation area and would be among the first areas evacuated in the event of a storm. Erik and Deirdre's unease is directly tied to Hurricane Sandy, the October 2012 storm that ravaged the northeastern seaboard and flooded large sections of lower Manhattan. The storm's flooding damage wasn't due to rainfall but to "storm surge," the abnormal tidal increase caused by a hurricane.

During 2012's Sandy, a 9.41 foot storm surge was compounded by a full-moon high tide, leading to a storm tide over 14 feet at its highest point. Approximately 305,000 New York homes were destroyed by the storm, and the city's total damage was estimated at \$19 billion. As sea levels continue to rise, flooding has become a concern for many coastal residents, including those in lower Manhattan. •

THE REAL ESTATE

PRE-WAR: Any apartment built prior to World War II can earn this designation, which is often used in real estate listings to connote desirably high ceilings, large rooms, and ornamented, thick plaster walls.



TENEMENT: "Tenement" refers to any residential building constructed before the Multiple Dwelling Law of 1929 and intended for use by three or more families. Tenement apartments often had windows facing narrow interior shafts (the Multiple Dwelling Law, by contrast, required that windows had to open at least 30 feet away from any other wall or obstruction), tiny water closets (or shared bathrooms), and tubs located in the kitchen. But beyond the layout of the apartment, tenements also connote a squalid history: largely occupied by low-income immigrants, tenements constructed in the 19th and early 20th centuries were rampant with overcrowding and disease. It is to this history that Erik and Brigid refer when they discuss Brigid's so-called "return to the slums."



THE NEIGHBORHOOD

CHINATOWN: In the mid-19th century, New York experienced an influx of male Chinese immigrants, many of them fleeing racism on the West Coast (where many Chinese immigrants had settled during the Gold Rush). These men, bound together by common culture and safety in numbers, gathered around the crossing of Pell, Mott, and Doyers Streets, and the neighborhood expanded outward from there. For decades, Chinatown was associated with opium dens and gambling houses. In the past century, the makeup of the immigrant community has changed (the mid-20th century brought immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan; today, many immigrants hail from Fujian province) and Chinatown has become one of Manhattan's tourist hubs.

INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR REED BIRNEY

Education dramaturg Ted Sod sat down with Reed Birney to discuss his role as Erik in *The Humans*.

TED SOD: Why did you choose to play the role of Erik Blake in *The Humans*?

REED BIRNEY: First of all, it's a beautiful play. I have never played anything like this role. I've never played a blue-collar character. I think because I look the way I do, I've made a career of playing privileged, entitled intellectuals—a lot of upper-middle-class people—and Erik is a janitor from Scranton, Pennsylvania. What I find so moving about Erik, and what I relate to, is his being a certain age and dealing with regrets in his life. You see him make certain decisions, and there's a point where he realizes, oh, this is it. There're no "do overs." He has really come to grips with what it means to be entering the last chapter of his life.

TS: One of the things that intrigued me about Erik is the idea of his recurring dreams. Is that important to you as the actor playing the character?

RB: I have had some recurring dreams myself, and I've never seen that idea manifested in a play quite this way, where recurring dreams or nightmares are discussed in such honest, truthful terms.

TS: Will you talk about how you perceive the relationship between Erik and his wife, Deirdre?

RB: I think it's a wonderful love story. They really adore each other. Erik loves Deirdre and really does love his family. It's the stuff he does, without thinking it through, that makes him realize he may have really screwed up his relationship to his wife and daughters. That's something almost all of us can relate to.

TS: Erik seems to have misgivings that his daughter Brigid lives in NYC.

RB: Erik didn't grow up in New York City. His mother did and worked desperately to get out. Erik was raised by a mother saying, "I hated New York. I had to get out of there." And so that's in his DNA. His daughter, Brigid, has decided New York is where she wants to be. He probably does have enormous fear about her being in the city, especially since he happened to be in New York and at the World Trade Center on 9/11. Why wouldn't he think, oh, it's an obvious target? They hit her once; why wouldn't they hit again? He has the fears that many non-New Yorkers have. Maybe the lack of fear most of us who live here have is really just intense denial—that you can live in the city and just blithely go around. I think it's a miracle that no one has ever blown up the 104 bus. They blow up buses everywhere else all the time. Why wouldn't they blow up the 104 bus? What's to stop them?

TS: This play takes place during a Thanksgiving dinner. I'm curious if you think families coming together for holidays are loaded events?



RB: There's certainly enough anecdotal evidence to support the idea that people lose their minds on the holidays. It probably has a lot to do with if your family is at all dysfunctional, if there's any kind of trouble lying beneath the surface. Usually, you've got children who have left home and are coming back into the house they were raised in, and then they're expected to behave in the way they did when they lived there. On top of that, in this play, Erik, his wife and mother are visiting a city that creates a bit of fear in them and puts them on edge. And usually on holidays, there's self-medicating; people who don't want to confront the actual issues start drinking. There's all this pressure for the day to be "wonderful!" People think, it's just a weekend; it's just a day, let it go. But under the surface it makes most people crazy, so they decide to have a few more glasses of wine or whiskey or whatever.

TS: I sense that Erik is testing Brigid's new boyfriend, Richard, who is co-hosting the holiday dinner. Do you see it that way?

RB: It makes complete sense that he would. In his mind, the relationship between Brigid and Richard is the only chance for him to have grandchildren. I don't think he necessarily thinks that there may be grandkids from Aimee and her ex. Of course, there could be, but the world is changing too fast for him, and he's trying to make sense of it all. The fact that Richard comes from a moneyed family probably also makes him suspicious. I think Erik's got all kinds of questions, as any father would, about whether Richard is going to be the guy who makes his daughter happy.

TS: The other thing that permeates the play is Catholicism. What do you make of that aspect of the story?

RB: Erik's an Irish Catholic guy who hasn't ever really thought that much about it, in terms of questioning. He grew up in the church and still goes to church, and I think for a lot of folks, their faith is unshakable because they were raised with it. Erik's faith helps him in some ways and doesn't help him in others. He's feeling pain right now based on what he's done—who knows what it would be like without his faith? He certainly is a confused guy at the moment, and it seems he doesn't have the right tools to figure it out. I think one of the reasons Erik's gotten

“I THINK THE IDEA OF AN EXAMINED LIFE IS, IN MANY WAYS, A REAL LUXURY. MEN LIKE ERIK HAVE TO SUPPORT THEIR FAMILIES, AND THEY WORK HARD—THEY’RE AT WORK FROM 6:30AM UNTIL 9:00PM, AND THEY’RE PUTTING OUT FIRES ALL DAY LONG. THERE’S NO TIME FOR CONTEMPLATING HOW LIFE COULD BE BETTER IN ERIK’S WORLD.”

into trouble is because he hasn’t led a particularly examined life. I think the idea of an examined life is, in many ways, a real luxury. Men like Erik have to support their families, and they work hard—they’re at work from 6:30am until 9:00pm, and they’re putting out fires all day long. There’s no time for contemplating how life could be better in Erik’s world.

TS: What do you look for from a director when you’re creating a role like this?

RB: Mostly what I look for is feeling safe in the room and that’s a pretty big thing. And then I look for somebody who’s a great collaborator. I love to have some laughs in the room. That’s an important thing to me. We’re putting on a play. Let’s not get confused about what we’re working on. I think one of the things that is so thrilling about Joe Mantello is his unbelievable meticulousness and attention to detail and his relentless striving for the truth. We worked together on *Casa Valentina*, and we used every second we could working on that play. I think we all loved it and we wanted it to hit right. Whereas other directors would have walked away once previews started, he spent every possible rehearsal hour he could, refining it. I remember one day we were in previews, and Joe said to me, “Reed, it’s got to be more personal.” And I said, “Joe, I feel like I’m doing that already. I don’t know what else I could possibly do to make it more personal.” He said, “Nope. You’re not.” So I went out onstage that night and really gave myself the task of making it more personal, not really even knowing what that would look like, and he was absolutely right.

TS: Will you talk about what it’s like to have the playwright in the room with you working on a new play?

RB: I love it when a playwright is there, because it’s his story—it’s the story he wants to tell—and to be able to pick his brain—making sure that we’re on the right track—I just love that so much.

TS: Having been part of this play’s development process, do you feel like that has informed how you’re playing the role? Has your take on the role evolved?

RB: I think it has to. It evolves for everybody. It evolves for the playwright, too. Most great playwrights will, at one point, say, “The character is yours now. You know him better now than I do.” There are great collaborator playwrights and there are playwrights who aren’t, who really feel like the play is done. They’re really not interested in hearing from an actor so much. I love collaborating on a new play with that first kind of playwright because you feel like your contribution has been valuable.

TS: Where did you get your training, and did you have any teachers who had a profound influence on you?

RB: I went to Boston University, undergraduate, the School of Fine Arts, and left after two years. I was feeling restless and ambitious, and so I moved to New York and went to Circle in the Square. I got my Equity card after three months in New

York doing terrible children’s theatre out on the road. But when I came back from that, I got into a class that was sponsored by the National Academy



of Television Arts and Sciences and, miraculously, it was free. I still, to this day, don’t understand how that was or why it was. It was run by a man named Tad Danielewski, who was a Polish refugee and rebel in World War II. He was this very strange, mysterious man, but brilliant with his observations about acting, and after a couple of years, he left to teach at Brigham Young University, and we found another remarkable teacher named Gene Lasko, who was Arthur Penn’s right hand. I studied in this class for about seven years; and I really credit Gene—and Tad—with teaching me everything I know and believe about acting. I think Gene’s philosophy was summed up in just one sentence: Tell the truth. Always tell the truth but in the most interesting way possible.

TS: Do you have any advice for a young person who wants to pursue an acting career?

RB: I would say two things: have a rich life outside of theatre, so that acting isn’t everything. That way when you don’t get the job or you get a bad review, it’s not the end of the world. And, you have to decide if you’re a lifer; and if you’re a lifer, then you have to be willing to spend the time and persevere because the business is designed to discourage you. They smell that despair when you walk into an audition. It’s your full-time job not to be discouraged. •



PIG FACT!

Saratoga Springs is rumored to be the birthplace of the potato chip.

BLUE COLLAR LIFE

In *The Humans*, Deirdre and Erik Blake, longtime residents of Scott Township, Pennsylvania, visit their daughter Brigid in New York City for Thanksgiving. As dinner is prepared, the family—including their older daughter Aimee, Brigid’s boyfriend Richard, and Erik’s senile mother Momo—discuss their respective life choices.

Deirdre and Erik struggle to understand why both of their daughters have chosen to leave northeastern Pennsylvania. As Erik says, “...yeah, well what I think’s funny is how you guys, you move to big cities and trash Scranton, when Momo [Erik’s mother] almost killed herself gettin outta New York—she didn’t have a real toilet in this city, and now her granddaughter moves right back to the place she struggled to escape...” The Blake family experience isn’t unique. High crime and decaying infrastructure made big cities



Scott Township, Pennsylvania

GENERATIONS BREAKDOWN

<i>Silent Generation 1927-1945</i>	Momo
<i>Baby Boomers 1946-1964</i>	Erik, Deirdre
<i>Gen X 1964-1980</i>	Aimee
<i>Millennials 1980-1994</i>	Brigid

unappealing to baby boomers in the 1970s and 1980s. But cities like New York have undergone major revitalization, which has led to millennials moving to cities at a higher rate and living there for longer periods of time.

The Blakes’ hometown, Scott Township, is a rural suburb of Scranton, a city of 75,000 in northeastern Pennsylvania. The Scranton region is the location of rich deposits of anthracite coal, a particularly valuable type of coal. Pennsylvania’s anthracite coal powered much of the Industrial Revolution

in the United States, and immigrants from all over Europe, including Irish Catholics like the Blakes, found work in the mines. The work was dangerous and dirty, and immigrant laborers were exploited by mine owners. In an attempt to prevent workers from organizing, mine owners encouraged ethnic tensions, and immigrants retained a strong sense of national identity. Coal production dropped steadily during the latter half of the twentieth century.

While coal is no longer the area’s leading industry, the sense of ethnic solidarity and class antagonism it created remains. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Scranton still notes the origins of some of its congregations: Italian, Slovak, German, Polish, Tyrolese, Lithuanian, and Magyar parishes all exist or existed in the region. In Momo, Erik, and Deirdre’s generations, parish membership was used to put a person in context. It revealed what neighborhood you were from, your family’s economic or employment situation, and your ethnic background.

The Catholic faith is clearly important to the elder Blakes, who sent their children to Catholic schools, volunteer with their parish, and give their daughter a statue of the Virgin Mary.

While the Catholic Church’s official stance is that homosexual acts are immoral (though being homosexual is not a sin), the Blakes’ acceptance of Aimee’s sexual

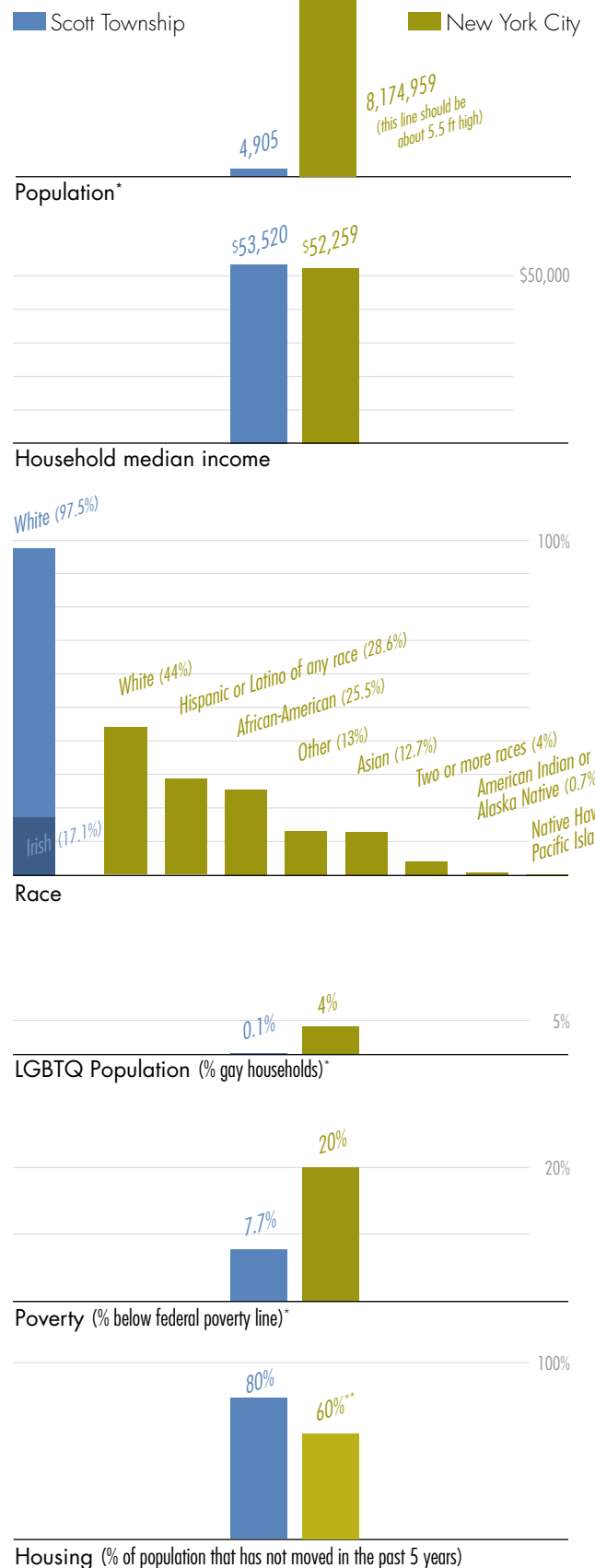
orientation is not unusual. Fifty-seven percent of American Catholics approve of legalizing same-sex marriage. Among Catholics aged 18-29, 85% say that homosexuality should be accepted rather than discouraged and 75% favor same-sex marriage. Brigid's decision to move in with Richard, her boyfriend, also goes against church teachings on sex before marriage but fits into the nation's overall trends.

In 1979, a member of the workforce aged 25-34 with a high school diploma earned, on average, the equivalent of \$32,299. But in 2012, that same worker would have earned, on average, just \$28,000. While they hung on to their jobs through several recessions, they've found themselves underpaid and overlooked in workplaces they remained loyal to for decades.

The Blakes' strong connection to their Irish heritage is apparent when the family sings *The Parting Glass*, "a good Irish tradition" that the family has done for generations. The song began as a Scottish or Irish folk tune, often called *Goodnight and God Be With You*. Many versions exist, but the most famous is a 1959 recording by the Clancy Brothers, an Irish folk group. Interestingly, the wording the Blake family uses in the first verse differs from the many published versions of the song. They sing "Oh all the money that ere I had / I lost it in good company," while others use "I spent it in good company," hinting that the Blakes don't feel agency over their financial lives.

Each member of the Blake family struggles with money in a different way. Deirdre and Erik both went into blue collar professions right out of high school and were able to support themselves.

The older Blakes' work struggles made it important that their daughters earn college degrees. Brigid, who chose a private college rather than the state school her parents had in mind, has large student loans to pay back. In 2013, 69% of graduating seniors had student loans, and the average debt was \$28,400. Compare that to 2003, when Aimee graduated. That year, 64.5% of graduating seniors had student loans, and the average debt was \$18,630. •



*2010 Census **2011 New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey

INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR CASSIE BECK

Education Dramaturg Ted Sod interviewed actress Cassie Beck about her role as Aimee in *The Humans*.

TED SOD: Where were you born? Where were you educated? When did you decide you wanted to become an actor?

CASSIE BECK: I was born in Tacoma, WA, the daughter of a military officer and the youngest of six children. I was raised in a station wagon, bound for wherever my father was expected next. We spent several years in California, both southern and northern. I went to high school in a tiny town in Mississippi where I first found theatre, thanks Mrs. Byrnes! Got my BFA in performance from the University of Memphis and spent a year in The Warehouse Theatre Journeyman program in South Carolina. After that, I upped and moved to San Francisco for my first professional job in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the Napa Valley Shakespeare Festival. I played Peaseblossom. In an honest to goodness vineyard. For a bunch of drunk people. Very Dionysian. It was glorious.

As for wanting to become an actor, well, as I mentioned, I'm the youngest of six kids. I had to be quick on my feet to get attention and food.

TS: You've done all the developmental readings of *The Humans*, which began on July 23, 2013. Can you give us a sense of what happens during these developmental readings?

CB: July 2013!!! Is that true? Oh my gosh, two years of development—and the first draft of the play was already so great—it had rhythm, humor, pathos and smarts. But mostly, it was inherently theatrical. I love scripts you can only do live in a theatre—you'll see what I mean! Most significantly, the action happens in real time. The play starts and the audience spends 90 real minutes with the family on stage—no jumps in time or physical space. Those watching are true voyeurs, peeking through the dollhouse. Real-time action is ambitious, from both the writing and acting perspectives. Because of the structure, the developmental workshops and readings covered physical logic/timing (Would I really spend that much time in the bathroom? Or How much conversation can I overhear when I'm



standing in the kitchen?); to ensemble work (Who are these people and what is the family dynamic?). Everyone pitches in with thoughts, personal anecdotes, and suggestions. Dramaturgically, Stephen had his eye on each character's progression—what was working and what was possibly missing against the bigger plot points—how the twists and turns hit each character and when. We toyed with physical space, dividing the rehearsal room into three parts with music stands further delineating the bathroom and kitchen. For the actors and Stephen, this was a chance to illuminate how staging can keep time with the rhythm of the play and the moments where physical action disrupted that flow. There were rewrites addressing these issues. By the time we read it before the general audience at the Powerhouse in Vassar, we were all very clear about the relationships, the time/space mechanics, and the major plot points while still discovering tone and individual character choices.

TS: What do you think the play is about? What did you learn as an actress from doing these developmental readings? How has your role as Aimee evolved? What questions did you ask the playwright, Stephen Karam, about your role?

TIMELINE OF ROUNDABOUT'S RELATIONSHIP WITH STEPHEN KARAM

December 2006 — Jason Moore sends Roundabout's literary team a new play that he's interested in directing, *Speech & Debate*, written by 26-year-old playwright Stephen Karam.

February 2007 — Reading of *Speech & Debate* featuring Sarah Steele, Gideon Glick, and Susan Blackwell, all of whom will go on to do the production.

March 2007 — Roundabout commits to the play and creates the Roundabout Underground program for emerging artists to feature it.

October 2007 — *Speech & Debate* opens to great acclaim and will enjoy a sold-out run until January 2008. Roundabout commissions Karam to write a new play for the Laura Pels Theatre.

May 2009 — First reading of Karam's commission, *Sons of the Prophet*.

April 2011 — After three more readings, *Sons of the Prophet* gets its world premiere directed by Peter DuBois at the Huntington Theatre in Boston.

October 2011 — *Sons of the Prophet* opens at Roundabout's Laura Pels Theatre. It's hailed by the New York Times as "the first important new play of the fall season. I will be very much surprised (albeit pleasantly) if it is bettered." Roundabout commissions another play from Karam.



“SHE’S THE PEACEMAKER IN THE FAMILY, CONSTANTLY AWARE OF WHAT PEOPLE ARE FEELING. SHE USES HER QUICK TONGUE AND HUMOR TO KEEP EVERYONE IN CHECK, BUT IN A LOVING WAY. HER APPROACH TO CONFLICT IS PRACTICAL CLEAR SIGHTEDNESS, BUT HER HEART IS HER GREATEST STRENGTH.”

CB: I think the play is about fear. Stephen quotes Napoleon Hill on the first page of the script: “There are six basic fears, with some combination of which every human suffers at one time or another...” To fear is the human condition. No one is immune. I think that is what I learned, or rather, re-learned from the development process. Fear is pervasive and takes numerous forms. The play is full of people wrestling fear to the ground, both consciously and subconsciously. The character of Aimee has incredibly high personal and interfamilial stakes. Most of her evolution has been about streamlining those stakes, especially relating to finances and career. I had several questions for Stephen about Aimee’s medical condition, ulcerative colitis, thus the bathroom queries I mentioned previously!

TS: What are the benefits of being attached to a project during the development process?

CB: The trust felt when I know I’m attached to the project communicates confidence, and that always helps bring out my best work. I’m not beholden to a “correct” interpretation of the role—just my interpretation. That collaborative spirit helps everyone remain flexible. Plus, keeping up with and understanding why a piece shifts requires, in addition to acting, some directorial/dramaturgical skills. My approach to development is to be of service to the writer, but production is where I really get to put my stamp on the part. I like the full workout that comes with creating a new play.

TS: Which aspect of your role is most challenging? Which is the most fun? Will you tell us about Aimee’s relationship to the rest of her family, as you understand it?

CB: I think the most challenging part is also the most fun, which is Aimee’s dry wit. She’s the peacemaker in the family, constantly aware of what people are feeling. She uses her quick tongue and humor to keep everyone in check, but in a loving way. Her approach to conflict is practical clear sightedness, but her heart is her greatest strength.

TS: What do you look for from a director?

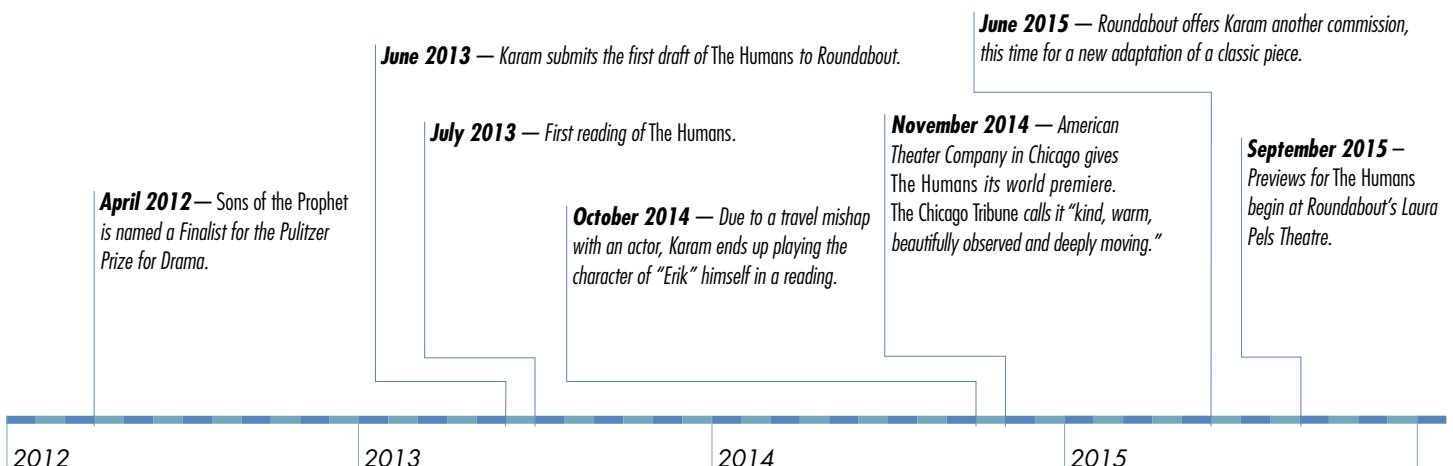
CB: Swag. I mean, like t-shirts. I want a director to get me a theatre tote or a sweatshirt or something. They’re the only ones that can get it for free. Also, I’m drawn to directors who communicate clearly and let me do my thing. I’m less interested in carrying out someone’s concept and more interested in working with a director to fulfill our shared vision of the piece. I’m extremely demanding of myself so I appreciate an open, positive rehearsal room. When a director can keep giving me insights into the role, I love that. I’ll try anything—once!

TS: How do you keep yourself inspired as an artist? Do you see the work of your peers? Travel? Read? Go to museums?

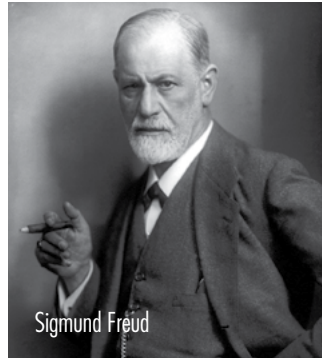
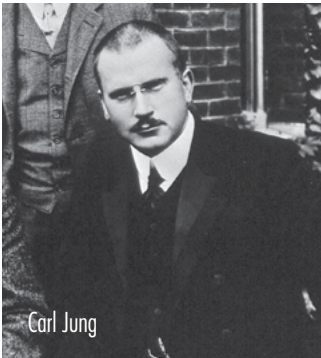
CB: All of the above. I love to travel, and to cook. I sketch and paint. I started as a dancer, so I adore any and all black and white movie musicals, especially Fred and Ginger films. I’m a British TV junkie and will read anything about the Tudors. I meditate and spend a lot of time in Central Park, which is the most inspiring of all—New York! Just taking in the city gets my creative juices flowing.

TS: Do you have any advice for a young person who wants to enter the profession of acting?

CB: YES—Put yourself in a position to do your best work. There is no formula for becoming a professional actor, so pick the path that allows you to gain the most experience and improve. That could be anything from grad school, to ensemble work, to self-devised work, or regional work in a smaller city. I think there is this notion that in order to be successful one must go to a top rated grad school and hit New York in your late teens or early 20s with guns blazing. That really works well for some, but personally, I never could have done that. It would have ruined theatre for me. I was able to acquire formal training and then join an ensemble theatre in San Francisco to hone some skills and gain professional experience. By the time I came to New York in my 30s, I had a much stronger sense of who I was and what I wanted in a career. Know yourself and follow your passion. •



INTERPRETATIONS OF DREAMS



The meaning of dreams is a recurring theme in *The Humans*. Brigid's father Erik and boyfriend Richard each reveal images from their "weird dreams," and since Richard has studied psychology, he is curious about

their meaning. Richard would likely have learned about the "founding father" of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) as well his colleague, Carl Jung (1875-1961). Both Freud and Jung analyzed their own dreams in addition to those of their patients. Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, calling them "the royal road to the unconscious."

According to Freud, during sleep, the ego's defenses are lowered, allowing subconscious impulses to come into awareness. Freud described two different aspects of dreams. The "manifest content," often based on recent events, is what the dreamer remembers. But beneath this lies the hidden wish or "symbolic meaning" of the dream, which is too forbidden or threatening for the dreamer to express consciously. Through a process called "dream-work," the dreamer translates the underlying wish into manifest content.

Freud identified three parts of dream-work. "Condensation" is the combining of two or more objects into one. For example, a man could dream about a woman who represents *both* his mother and his wife or lover. "Displacement" is the process of transferring feelings about someone onto a different person or object. In one case, Freud's patient dreamt of strangling a small dog, which Freud traced back to unconscious rage towards a sister-in-law. "Secondary elaboration" is the mental process of stringing together images in a logical order, making the manifest content seem more believable, while hiding the underlying wish. Freud also considered the possibility of universal symbols that held the same meaning for everyone. A key example is seeing all towers, poles, trees, guns, and swords as phallic symbols.

Jung was initially Freud's follower, but over time he diverged from Freud on several key ideas, including the approach to dream interpretation. Freud believed in the universality of dreams and the process of free association. In talking about their dreams, patients would speak freely, allowing thoughts to flow without a specific topic and with no intervention from the analyst. Jung disagreed, believing that instead of free associating, one should look closely to the actual content of the dream. In Jung's view, symbols held very specific meanings for each individual. So if Erik came to Jung with a dream about a tunnel, Jung would analyze what associations Erik might have with tunnels. Despite different interpretative processes, Jung, Freud, and many psychologists today still agree that dreams offer valuable insight to understanding the unconscious. •

WHAT DOES A TUNNEL MEAN IN A DREAM?

According to a contemporary psychologist, tunnels often symbolize the process of transformation. Tunnels are a way of moving from one location to another, and when we are in a tunnel, we have left one place behind, but we have not arrived at our destination. Because tunnels are usually built by humans, dreaming about being in a tunnel could represent a life change that the dreamer must plan and activate on his own. Also, since tunnels are underground spaces, they may symbolize changes happening below the surface, hidden from view either by or for the dreamer.

Click [here](#) to read interpretations of some common recurring dreams.

PIG FACT!

According to playwright Stephen Karam, you never want to be the last person at the table to smash the pig. With so many people breaking the candy before you, you'll end up feeling around in the pouch for a remaining hunch to smash!



DRAMA FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Relationships with family members can turn holidays into stressful occasions, stirring up memories, fears, regrets, and resentments. No wonder American playwrights have been so inspired by the impact of holiday gatherings! In *The Humans*, Stephen Karam explores the emotional impact of a Thanksgiving dinner. Here is a selection of other American plays in which families gather with dramatic or comedic results. •

Click [here](#) for advice on avoiding the drama at your own holiday gathering.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

The Long Christmas Dinner (1931)
Thornton Wilder

Wilder theatrically portrays generations of the Bayard family over the span of 90 years through a metaphorical long Christmas dinner. Time passes before the audience's eyes; characters are born and die, conversations repeat, while industrialization transforms the outside world. The one-act play looks at loss and change but affirms family values and optimism about American progress.



The Long Christmas Ride Home (2004)
Paula Vogel

Like Wilder, Vogel also spans several decades. An unnamed family drives to the grandparents' house for what turns out to be a very unjoyous Noel. In the car, father and mother deal with marital strife while their three children fight. The small children are first represented as puppets; as they grow-up, they are played by adult actors. The passing of time shows the lasting impact of childhood anxieties and family dysfunction.



The Assembled Parties (2013)
Richard Greenberg

In a large Upper West Side apartment, the Bascovs are assimilated Jews who celebrate Christmas, first in 1980 and then in 2000. The family centers around two mothers: former teen star Julie and her sister-in-law Faye. We first see the family experiencing the optimism of the Reagan era, but the 20 year gap highlights the impact of loss and disappointment over time.



HAPPY FOURTH OF JULY!

Ah, Wilderness! (1933)
Eugene O'Neill

Set in 1906, O'Neill's only comedy looks at the Miller family on the Fourth of July. Sixteen-year-old son Richard almost loses his first love and confronts feeling like an outsider in his family. A night of drinking and carousing teaches Richard some tough life lessons before the play's happy ending. The play features an entire lobster meal eaten by the Miller family on stage!



The Fifth of July (1978)
Lanford Wilson

Wilson created a trilogy of plays about the Talley family in Missouri. The first two take place on July 4th, 1944. The third play, set in 1977 on the day *after* the 4th, explores the disillusionment of the post-Vietnam era. Kenneth Talley is a paraplegic war veteran who is ready to sell the family home to wealthy friends, but other Talleys want to keep it in the family.



TODAY'S YOUR BIRTHDAY!

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955)
Tennessee Williams

A 65th birthday party for patriarch Big Daddy Pollitt brings the family together on a Mississippi plantation. But attempts at festivity cannot mask the anticipation of Big Daddy's impending death and the question of who will inherit his estate. The play, which takes place in the course of a single evening, exposes the deception and greed that lurk beneath the surface of a family celebration. •



THE COST OF HEALTH CARE

The world of *The Humans* is filled—in ways large and small—with concerns about health. Aimee has ulcerative colitis. Momo is suffering from dementia. Deirdre has arthritis. Erik has a bad back. Richard is on medication for chronic depression. Brigid is trying to find the money for a therapist. Both within and beyond the immediate family, sickness and caretaking loom: Brigid and Aimee’s Aunt Mary just had both knees replaced (and Deirdre drives her to physical therapy), Scranton family friend Kay Hoban has ovarian cancer (and Deirdre takes her to her treatments), Momo needs constant care (and Deirdre, Erik, and Uncle John are splitting their time to watch her).

The cycle of ill health is exhausting enough, but in *The Humans* and in the real world, the troubles of illness are often compounded by troubles of money. In *The Humans*, we see that Erik and Deirdre don’t have money to hire a nurse for Momo, that Aimee is struggling to keep her job amidst her frequent absences (“...you get the sense they support your chronic illness as long as it doesn’t affect your billable hours.”), and that even mindful grocery shopping comes at a price (when blueberry donuts are cheaper than blueberries, can you afford to care about your health?).

By 2030, nearly 1 in every 5 Americans, or 20% of the total population, will be over the age of 65. This is a sharp spike from previous levels (13% in 2010), due largely to the aging of the “baby boom” generation and to a widespread increase in lifespan. This older population will demand an unprecedented level of care—and costs. Today, chronic diseases and degenerative illnesses have supplanted acute illnesses and infectious diseases as the leading causes of death for older Americans, meaning that long-term care costs are higher than ever. The impact will

be felt on both a national level (where Social Security and Medicare benefits are already strained) and in the average home. An annual study by Fidelity Investments estimated that a 65-year-old couple with Medicare coverage retiring in 2013 would need \$220,000 in savings to cover future medical costs. And this striking number includes only basic costs like deductibles, copayments, and prescriptions. It doesn’t include the cost of long-term care—despite the fact that some 70% of Americans over age 65 will require it in their lifetime. Long-term care can come in a variety of forms, but the two most common are home health aides and nursing facilities. Home health aides (who, depending on a patient’s needs, can do everything from grocery shopping to assisting with bathing and other daily needs) can cost upwards of \$13,000 per month for 24/7 care. And average nursing home costs easily stretch close to \$7,000 each month for a private room.

For younger patients who suffer from chronic diseases, like Aimee, the financial cost of treatment may be slightly more manageable, thanks to employer health coverage. But even when finances aren’t a major issue, the logistics of health care can be exhausting. In a 2013 *New York Times* article, Aaron E. Carroll, a doctor who suffers from ulcerative colitis, wrote about the process of refilling his medication. This seemingly straightforward aspect of his treatment is actually a quarterly “nightmare,” as every three months he must go through a process of getting new bloodwork from a remote lab, obtaining a new prescription from his doctor, clearing both lab and pharmacy logistics with his insurance company, sending the prescription to a mail-order pharmacy, following up at every step of the process, and dealing with a multitude of communication gaps and system errors between his doctor, lab, insurance company, and pharmacy. Even as an extremely well-educated, thorough, and proactive patient, Carroll often deals with days-long gaps between his medication running out and the refill arriving. For patients who are not as well-versed in the system (let alone those who suffer from hearing or eye problems, who don’t speak English, or who are in cognitive decline), the frustration of the process is hugely amplified. Carroll points out that while health care access (as provided by the Affordable Care Act, for instance) is a hugely important goal, ease of health care use is equally important—and an oft-neglected aspect of health care reform. •



PIG FACT!

There are three sizes of Peppermint Pig available from Saratoga Sweets: Clarence (large), Noel (medium), and Holly (small). Each one depicts the pig in a slightly different position.

INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR SARAH STEELE

Education dramaturg Ted Sod discusses *The Humans* and the role of Brigid with actress Sarah Steele

TED SOD: Where were you born? Where were you educated? When did you decide you wanted to become an actor?

SARAH STEELE: I was born in North Carolina but moved to a suburb just outside of Philadelphia when I was 5, so mostly grew up there. I decided I wanted to become an actor when I was 8 years old. I literally heard a friend on the playground bragging about how he was taking acting classes and thought, "Oh! That's what I'm supposed to be doing!" I went to college at Columbia but studied English, not theatre.

TS: Stephen Karam wrote the role of Brigid for you after you were in his first play at Roundabout, *Speech & Debate*. What are the benefits of having a role written specifically for you?

SS: Well, there are the obvious benefits like the character sort of sounds like me. But more than that, it's wonderful to be written for because then the writer fights for you to get the part! Stephen is probably my favorite playwright of all time, so getting to bring his work to life is a huge honor.

TS: You've done almost all the developmental readings of *The Humans*, which began July 23, 2013. What did you learn as an actress from doing these developmental readings? How has your role as Brigid evolved?

SS: Developmental readings are actually the best part of being an actor for me. I once spent a month doing so many developmental readings at the Roundabout that we all joked that I was an "artist in residence" there. But to me it's such a special time to be involved with a new play. Because you get to ask questions and help identify problems and hopefully help make the play better. With Brigid, there was a concern at the beginning that maybe she was too harsh. But Stephen has definitely moved beyond that by now.

TS: Which aspect of your role is most challenging? Which is the most fun?

SS: I don't really know what is most challenging or most fun because we haven't yet started rehearsal! But I will say that getting to tangle with Reed Birney, Cassie Beck, and Jayne Houdyshell in the workshops was crazily fun and challenging. They are absolute dynamite, and I feel out of my league in the best way.

TS: Brigid and her significant other, Richard, are hosting a family dinner on Thanksgiving. Do you think family gatherings in holidays are inherently dramatic?

SS: Family holidays are extremely dramatic! Especially when you start throwing significant others and alcohol into the mix.

TS: How do you keep yourself inspired as an artist? Do you see the work of your peers? Travel? Read? Go to museums?



Sarah Steele

SS: I see a ton of theatre whenever I'm not working to stay inspired. I love feeling like I'm a part of the theatre community and following the work of actors and writers I admire. I'm a big reader, too.

TS: Do you have any advice for a young person who wants to enter the profession of acting?

SS: My advice to young people who want to act is just to do it as much as you can! Find friends who also want to do it and have readings of great plays in your apartment. You don't have to wait for someone else to tell you that you can do it. You can be getting better on your own all the time. •

PIG FACT!

The Peppermint Pig is about the size of a real pig's foot!



DESIGNER STATEMENTS

DAVID ZINN/SET DESIGNER

In designing *The Humans*, I've tried to capture a couple of things: a space which both accommodates, in a technical way, the complicated and particular geography of Stephen's story—a maze of rooms and hallways and lights, places to overhear and hide and disappear and surprise. And a space that captures the banal, familiar, and uncanny feeling of a near-empty New York apartment, where it seems just remotely possible that the architecture itself isn't so happy you're there. Familiarity and Unease, I guess, is what we've been after.

SARAH LAUX/COSTUME DESIGNER

If I do my job correctly, the general audience member will not notice the costumes—that's always the goal I strive for in these contemporary shows. The characters should just seem like they arrived to that destination wearing their "regular clothes"—whether that's fancy dress or sweatpants. As a result, I tend to take a very organic approach to the piece. I try to spend a lot of time in rehearsal, working directly with the actors to find the key pieces that help make the characters feel as real as possible, whether it's landing on the perfect pair of shoes or a small necklace that has a tangible feeling of embodying a character. I like to think of it as curating the look of the show. Yes, there is an overall design eye at work, but the costume design choices cannot be made in a vacuum—all the design elements work together to make the finished feeling of the show.

JUSTIN TOWNSEND/LIGHTING DESIGNER

Darkness has a history in our storytelling of relating to the unconscious; it is the stuff of dreams. Our earliest storytellers must have gathered their audiences around fires, with the darkness closely circling them. The surrounding night allowed strange and perhaps scary tales to materialize from the shadows. In the theatre, we frequently start our productions by "going to black" or darkening the stage to a full blackout. This long-standing tradition must come from a desire to create a place of dreams or imagination in front of us when the lights come back on. We close our eyes, and when we open them, we are transported to another place, into another reality. Stephen Karam's play has mystery creeping in around the edges. *The Humans* explores a descent into darkness.



Cassie Beck and Sarah Steele in rehearsal for *The Humans*

What could happen in the surrounding gloom? What will happen? This darkness invites the audience's imagination to infuse the story with their own personal fears. Without darkness, there cannot be light; the contrast of light against dark allows us to perceive the other. I'm working on crafting a world lit by only a few light sources, starting with a clear and soft optimism that slowly deepens into mystery and fearsomeness. As a single light fights back the darkness, the audience is reminded of their primal fear of the dark.

FITZ PATTON/SOUND DESIGNER

The Humans is a very low key play born into a hyperbolic era. America 2015 is an oligarchic, triple espresso, three fingers neat, extreme fighting, caliente landscape of extra salt, extra cheese, turn up the volume "verite." While we crave naturalism, we demand excess, and the attention span of the average 30-year-old man is now less than that of a 5-year-old child. Into this culture of inversions, of extreme banality, comes *The Humans*. Suffused with the tediousness of sub-par intergenerational holiday malaise, the play is also haunted, and the combo platter of a plausible but just slightly too complex yet unrewarding living space that is surrounded with just as plausible yet slightly over dense sound sources such as unidentifiable mechanical devices, mysterious thumps, laboring electrics, speechless neighbors, shuffling passersby and in a final, willful act, a door that closes itself, untouched, taking the play to blackness. Much of this mysterious, semi-unprovoked surround sound world has fallen to me, and I stare at it, as of this writing, with a reasonable understanding of the parts, but a somewhat unnerved



Set Model by David Zinn

awareness that they will never quite add up and that that's ok. The play itself suspends the viewer in a web of the curious, the subtle suggestion that leads nowhere but builds an internal emotional logic that unpacks something very real about our country today: our creeping sense that something momentous is growing within us and that we have never been less able to handle substance. Ours is a country swamped in "Social Media," in communication that covers reality rather than revealing it, in business that yields immobility. And we express this with a sense, a subtle and ceaseless standing wave of anxiety. Rather than tackle this head on, *The Humans* evokes this pervasive inapprehension, this seemingly sourceless agita, and sound, which taps into our reptile brain, our survival center, which allows us to gather information beyond walls that stop our vision, is the messenger. The role of sound in this play is to subtly undo the certitude of the visual space, to

ambiguate it, to offer rootless complexity. By and large, very little of the sound in *The Humans* is remarked upon. But it is all felt. And its lack of seeming intention is the heart of its relevance. •



PIG FACT!

It takes about 90 minutes to make a batch of five eight-ounce pigs. The candy is boiled in tea kettles, then hand-poured into aluminum molds.

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

FOR
EDUCATORS

HOW DOES A PLAYWRIGHT EXPLORE THE DIFFERENCE IN VALUES BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN?

In *The Humans*, Deirdre and Erik Blake and their adult daughters come into conflict over their different values. How do students experience similar conflicts in their own lives? (Common core codes: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C)

ACTIVATE Establish one side of the classroom as the “agree” space, and one side as the “disagree” space. Ask students to position themselves across the room based on how much they agree or disagree with the following statements. After each statement, have one or two students defend their position.
Practice statement: Cats are wonderful.

Statements (edit or adapt for your classroom age and culture):
The cost of tuition will be the most important factor in my college decision.
It’s a good idea to live with someone before you marry them.
It’s important to follow my dreams, no matter where they take me.
It’s important to live near your parents/family when you are an adult.
It’s important to me to practice my faith/attend religious services.
I’ll pass on my parents/family traditions to the next generation.
My parents/family think it’s ok to live with someone before you marry them.
My parents/family want me to live near them when I grow up.

REFLECT As a guided discussion or a personal writing activity, ask students the following questions:
In what ways are your values different from your parents/family’s values? What conflicts can you imagine happening between generations with different values?

Optional extension: Ask students to write a scene in which characters from different generations come into conflict over differing values and life choices.

HOW DOES A SET DESIGNER USE A PLAYWRIGHT’S DESCRIPTION TO CREATE A SET DESIGN?

(Common core codes: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1)

MATERIALS: blank paper (at least 8.5 x 11 inches), colored pencils or crayons, copies of the set description

READ Distribute or post copies of playwright Stephen Karam’s description of the setting of *The Humans*.

A turn-of-the-century ground floor/basement duplex tenement apartment in New York City’s Chinatown. It’s just big enough to not feel small. It’s just small enough to not feel big. The two floors are connected via a spiral staircase. Each floor has its own entrance.

Upstairs: two rooms divided by an open entryway. The room with the staircase also has the apartment’s lone, large deep-set window with bars.

Downstairs: two windowless rooms divided by an even larger open entryway – with a different floor plan than upstairs. A small kitchen alley is wedged awkwardly behind the spiral staircase. The other room is dominated by a modest folding table. The table is set with six paper plates and napkins with turkeys on them. Plastic silverware.

The apartment is a touch ghostly.

CREATE Ask students to draw a rendering of the set of *The Humans* based on Karam’s description. What is the layout? What colors are used in the set?

REFLECT Post renderings around the room. Host a gallery walk. How does the set make the audience feel? How does the playwright communicate that to the set designer? What story might take place in this apartment?

POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

FOR
EDUCATORS

HOW DO THEATRE ARTISTS EXPLORE HOLIDAY GATHERINGS AS SETTINGS FOR FAMILY DRAMAS?

You've seen how family conflicts and secrets emerged over the course of a Thanksgiving dinner in *The Humans*. Now, students develop original family stories using tableaux and dialogue. (Common core codes: SL1b)

DISCUSS Why do you think *The Humans* is set during Thanksgiving? Why are family gatherings a rich source of dramatic material? (Examples of American plays set during other holidays can be found on page 15.)

ACTIVATE Generate a list of other holidays that bring families together. Students work in "families" with 4-6 per group, choosing their family roles (parents, children, etc.) and one holiday. Create three tableaux (frozen stage pictures), each showing the family in a different moment during one holiday gathering. The tableaux should show a dramatic situation occurring in the family. If time and interest allow, students can speak one line for what the character is thinking or doing in each tableau.

REFLECT What themes and issues do you see in your family tableaux? Why are family gatherings a rich source of dramatic material for writers and actors?

HOW DO WRITERS APPLY AN UNDERSTANDING OF PSYCHOLOGY TO CREATE DREAMS FOR THEIR CHARACTERS?

After seeing how playwright Stephen Karam uses dreams to explore characterization, students explore Freud's theory of dreams and create monologues about dreams for fictional characters. (Common core codes: 11-12 3B)

ANALYZE Read and discuss the article about dream interpretation and psychology on page 14 of this UPSTAGE guide. Then, analyze these lines from *The Humans*, in which Erik relates his recurring dream:

...there'll be a, a woman...her back's to me...or maybe...something happens where...

...her head turns, and

I can see that her face is all...her skin's stretched over her eyes and her mouth...just skin where her eyes and mouth should be, you know—yeah, skin over the holes in her ears, over everything...the woman without a [face]...

she's trying to get me in this, like a tunnel?

WRITE Students select another character from *The Humans** and imagine a dream this character might have. What is the manifest content? What secret wish might this character have? Write a monologue in which the character tells someone about their dream.

*or you may use characters from any fictional text or another play your class is reading.

SHARE Allow a few students to read their monologue to the class. Invite listeners to "interpret" the meanings of this character's dream, based on their understanding of psychology.

GLOSSARY

BHUTAN	a small Himalayan country landlocked between India and China <i>Deirdre volunteers with refugees from Bhutan.</i>	KLONOPIN	drug used to treat anxiety, panic attacks, and seizures <i>Aimee jokes that the IT department's warning about their mother's email was prophetic.</i>
CESSPOOL	a filthy and disgusting place <i>Erik tells the family that Momo grew up in a two-room cesspool.</i>	PROPHETIC	predicts the future; prophet like <i>Aimee jokes that the IT department's warning about their mother's email was prophetic.</i>
DYSPLASIA	abnormal development of organs, tissues, or cells that can lead to cancer <i>Aimee mentions that her test results confirmed dysplasia.</i>	SPELUNKING	the exploration of caves <i>Deirdre compares finding the bathroom in the dark to spelunking.</i>
		ULCERATIVE COLITIS	an inflammatory bowel disease that affects the lining of one's large intestine and rectum <i>Aimee has ulcerative colitis.</i>

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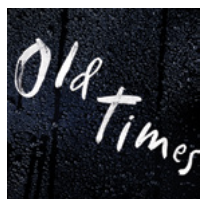
ABOUT ROUNABOUT

ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY

Founded in 1965, Roundabout Theatre Company has grown from a small 150-seat theatre in a converted supermarket basement to become the nation's most influential not-for-profit theatre company, as well as one of New York City's leading cultural institutions. With five stages on and off Broadway, Roundabout now reaches over 700,000 theatregoers, students, educators and artists across the country and around the world every year.

We are committed to producing the highest quality theatre with the finest artists, sharing stories that endure, and providing accessibility to all audiences. A not-for-profit company, Roundabout fulfills its mission each season through the production of classic plays and musicals; development and production of new works by established and emerging writers; educational initiatives that enrich the lives of children and adults; and a subscription model and audience outreach programs that cultivate and engage all audiences.

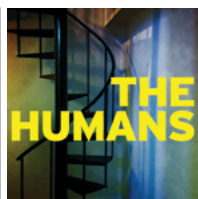
2015-2016 SEASON



By Harold Pinter

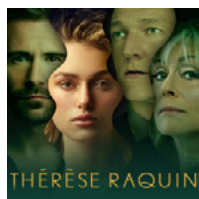
Starring
Clive Owen, Eve Best
and Kelly Reilly

Directed by
Douglas Hodge



By Stephen Karam

Directed by
Joe Mantello



By Helen Edmundson

Based upon the novel by
Émile Zola

Starring Keira Knightley,
Gabriel Ebert, Matt Ryan
and Judith Light

Directed by Evan Cabnet



By Michael Frayn

Directed by
Jeremy Herrin



Book by Joe Masteroff
Music by Jerry Bock
Lyrics by Sheldon Harnick

Choreographed by
Warren Carlyle

Directed by Scott Ellis



By Eugene O'Neill

Starring
Jessica Lange, Gabriel
Byrne, Michael Shannon
and John Gallagher, Jr.

Directed by
Jonathan Kent



By Lindsey Ferrentino

Directed by
Patricia McGregor

STAFF SPOTLIGHT: INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR OF INDIVIDUAL GIVING, TYLER ENNIS

TED SOD: Tell us about yourself. Where were you born and educated? How and when did you become the Development department's Director of Individual Giving?

TYLER ENNIS: I think being raised in the South was beneficial to becoming a development professional, especially in Individual Giving. My Southern charm is surprisingly appreciated by New Yorkers. I was born in Atlanta (my father worked for Coca-Cola, imagine that...), but I grew up in rural Georgia. My grandmother instilled my love for theatre and would take me to the local university in my hometown or the Fox Theatre in Atlanta. I remember my first musical was *Cats!* I studied music and business at Berry College in northwest Georgia and became passionate for all performing arts. I acted in several plays and musicals (*The Laramie Project* and *Brigadoon* were highlights), and I also competed nationally with our speech team. I took my first job in the theatre world doing Company Management at La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego. It was so rewarding to be directly involved with the production and artists, and I was hooked. I continued my education at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) and received my M.A. in Arts Administration as well as my M.B.A. I learned that development was a career in-demand and began to intern and work in the field at other theatres, including Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park and Manhattan Theatre Club.

TS: Describe your job at RTC. What are your responsibilities?

TE: Currently, I'm the Director of Individual Giving and oversee our membership programs and fundraising efforts for individual donors.

I always dreamed of living in New York City and working in theatre. I was fortunate to land a job at Roundabout in the spring of 2009. (Roundabout was one of my case studies for my graduate thesis!) I couldn't ask for a better home, led by incredible arts professionals, to grow in my career and learn so much about fundraising.

TS: What is the best part of your job? What is the hardest part?

TE: The best part of my job is interacting with our (very generous) donors who share my passion for theatre. Going to a special event and talking to other theatre lovers about Roundabout while mingling with Sutton Foster? Call me crazy, but sounds like my personal heaven. The most challenging part of the job is communicating our very real need for support. A majority of the public would think that ticket revenue is enough to support Roundabout's operations, but that's just not the case. As a not-for-profit company, we do so much more for encouraging the art form: developing new works and playwrights, integrating theatre in New York schools, and providing many affordable ways for everyone to access Roundabout's productions.

TS: Why do you choose to work at Roundabout?

TE: I choose to work at Roundabout because it's exciting, ever-changing, and fun. This is my seventh season at Roundabout, and it still feels like my first. I have the best mentors in the business. The possibilities are simply endless for a company that is run so well, no matter how dramatic the family might be! It's theatre, after all. •

Learn more at roundabouttheatre.org. Find us on:



WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

TICKET POLICY

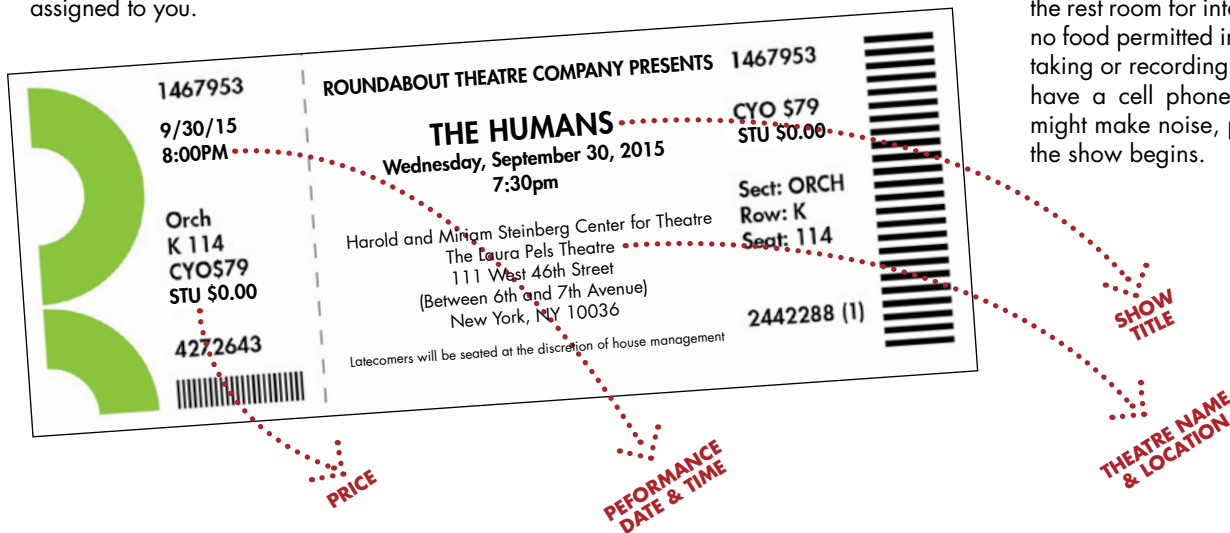
As a student, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat 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 or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



Partial underwriting support for *The Humans* is provided by Judith and Douglas Krupp, The Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater, and Lauren and Danny Stein.

Roundabout's work with new and emerging playwrights and directors, as well as development of new work, is made possible by Kathryn Patterson and Tom Kempner.

We gratefully acknowledge the Roundabout Leaders for New Works: Alec Baldwin, Peggy and Mark Ellis, Jodi Glucksman, Sylvia Golden, Judith and Douglas Krupp, K. Myers, Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater, Lauren and Danny Stein, Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust, Yolanda R. Turocy, Lori Uddenberg, and Xerox Foundation.

The Humans is supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in Partnership with the City Council.

As a not-for-profit organization, we rely on the support of our passionate individual, foundation, corporate, and government donors. Because of these dedicated supporters who give generously each year, all of our Education programs and activities are made possible. Due to space limitations, this list reflects gifts of \$5,000 and above to Education at Roundabout between September 1, 2014 and September 24, 2015:

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Education programs at Roundabout are supported, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

