DENVER CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
Theatre Company

INSIDE OUT

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS

Illustration by Kyle Malone

DENVER CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
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Little Shop of Horrors

Book and Lyrics by **Howard Ashman**
Music by **Alan Menken**
Based on the film by **Roger Corman**, Screenplay by **Charles Griffith**
Directed by **Chris Coleman**

APR 11 – MAY 25

WOLF THEATRE

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THE BASICS

Synopsis: Seymour Krelborn is perennially down on his luck. Working at a flower shop on Skid Row, he is constantly berated by his boss, Mr. Mushnik. He's infatuated with his co-worker Audrey, but she is caught in a toxic relationship with a sadistic dentist. One day, Seymour chances upon a strange and mysterious new plant cutting, which he nurses back to health and names Audrey II, after his crush. When he discovers the flytrap's appetite for human blood, it thrives and begins to sing for its supper. But when Audrey II's bloodlust becomes insatiable, Seymour faces a choice: stick with the carnivorous plant and get everything his heart desires or take a stand to prevent Audrey II from world domination.

Character Descriptions:

Seymour Krelborn: a naïve, put-upon, good-hearted clerk at a struggling flower shop. Fascinated with unusual plants.

Audrey: a terminally late, frequently bruised employee at the flower shop. A dreamer. The secret love of Seymour's life.

Mr. Mushnik: their boss. A failure of an East Side florist.

Orin Scrivello: Audrey's boyfriend. Confident, handsome, and sadistic. A dentist.

Crystal, Ronette, and Chiffon: Skid Row locals. Savvy, observant, and always around.

Audrey II: a strange and interesting plant.

The Composer and the Playwright:

Alan Menken (Composer): Legendary composer Alan Menken has created some of the most beloved songs and musical scores of our time, with his unique voice capturing the imagination of audiences for over 35 years. Known for his music on stage and screen, he is noted for his multiple works with the Walt Disney company (*The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin*), as well as Broadway stage musicals *Sister Act* and *Little Shop of Horrors*. Menken has received eight Oscars and numerous other awards including Golden Globes, Grammys, Drama Desk Awards, and a Tony Award. www.alanmenken.com

Howard Ashman (Playwright, Lyricist): Ashman is best known as a pivotal creative mind behind the Disney animation renaissance with such films as *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *Beauty and The Beast* (which is dedicated "to our friend, Howard, who gave a mermaid her voice and a beast his soul"). Ashman's first love was theatre. He was a founder of off-off-Broadway's renowned WPA Theatre, where he conceived, wrote, and directed *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, as well as the classic musical *Little Shop of Horrors* (both with music by Alan Menken). In 1986, he wrote and directed the Broadway musical *Smile* (music by Marvin Hamlisch). Lamented as a lost treasure of the 1980s theater scene, *Smile* remains popular on high school and college campuses throughout the country. In his short career, he received many awards, including The Outer Circle Critics Award, New York Drama Critics Circle and Drama Desk (*Little Shop*), two Oscars (*Mermaid* and *Beauty*), two Golden Globes (*Mermaid* and *Beauty*), and multiple Grammys. His papers are in the permanent collection of the Library of Congress. *Howard*, a documentary about his life, was produced in 2018. Mr. Ashman died in 1991 of complications due to AIDS. www.howardashman.com

INFLUENCES

Stages of the Story's Development:

1894: H.G. Wells publishes the short story *The Flowering of a Strange Orchid* about a murderous flower.

1932: John Collier writes *Green Thoughts*, inspired by the Wells story.

1956: Arthur C. Clarke adapts the story again as *The Reluctant Orchid*. In it, the protagonist realizes his orchid is murderous and tries to use it as a weapon.

1960: Charles B. Griffith and Roger Corman put their heads together and, likely based on *The Reluctant Orchid* and the stories that inspired it, they write a screenplay called *The Passionate People Eater*. It is ultimately released with the title *The Little Shop of Horrors*.

1982: Howard Ashman and Alan Menken adapt the Griffith/Corman film into a hit off-Broadway musical.

1986: Frank Oz makes the musical into a film. Menken and Ashman write a few new songs for it, including "Mean Green Mother from Outer Space," and after some crowd testing, they change the story's ending.

2003: *Little Shop* gets its first revival, this time making it all the way to Broadway (after a tumultuous pre-production run in Florida, during which the original director was replaced, along with most of the cast). Several small revisions are made to the lyrics and orchestration. After the show closes in New York, it goes on national tour for two years.

**The script and score remain unchanged after 2003, but the show continues to be produced around the world. The first major London revival premiered on the West End in 2007, and an off-Broadway production at the Westside Theatre has been running in New York since 2019.* Little Shop *is among the most-produced plays at high schools in the US.*

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Little Shop: A Second Chance

It was 1979, and Alan Menken and Howard Ashman figured they should quit. Menken, a composer, was already making his living writing jingles for commercials, and Ashman? Well, maybe he'd give up writing and directing to go into selling shoes, he griped to a friend. Musical theatre wasn't working out. The pair's first collaboration—*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, an adaptation of a Kurt Vonnegut novel—had flopped, despite an enthusiastic reception at Ashman's scrappy, 99-seat WPA Theatre. Eager to capitalize on major producer interest, the artistic team had agreed to transfer the show into an ornate, 1129-seat off-Broadway theatre space, to their own detriment. "It lost its intimacy, its sweetness, its innocence… [it became] something bloated, loud, irritating and judgmental," Kyle Renick, the producing director at the WPA Theatre, remarked to *Playbill*. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* closed after only 49 shows off-Broadway, and never even had a recorded soundtrack. It was a devastating failure for budding hopefuls Menken and Ashman. Now, they could either cut their losses and get out of the business or give it one more shot. But to take a risk on another musical, Ashman and Menken knew it would have to meet some very specific criteria.

When Howard Ashman was a young teen, he'd happened to see a B-movie called *The Little Shop of Horrors*. Filmed in two days on a borrowed set, it was a classic Roger Corman horror-comedy flick. Now, around 20 years later, Ashman began to think *Little Shop* might be the very thing with which to rescue his career. In a certain way, it shared values with *Rosewater*. As Ashman's sister observed to *Playbill*, "Howard had a political edge. He was interested in people who weren't getting a fair shot—people who hadn't been born by the Money River, to use Vonnegut's line." Howard Ashman didn't want to write the next *Camelot*, he wanted to tell blue-collar stories. *Little Shop* did that. Most importantly, unlike *Rosewater*, it featured a small cast of characters, so the show could be performed in a relatively minuscule off-Broadway venue—300 seats or less—without hemorrhaging money. And it had this strange, unignorable element at its heart that would "demand attention" from audiences all over the city: a monster plant.

Menken was on board immediately. They began work on the adaptation. Ashman realized, to his dismay, that tone would be a major hurdle. His first instinct had been to write a spoof—a musical theatre-style satire of the original movie—but it wasn't working. It felt tacky. Unrelatable. Then, he had a revelation: "I think it's the dark side of *Grease*" (*Playbill*). Ashman and Menken dove into 50s and 60s music. They listened to doo-wop, Phil Spector girl groups, and early rock 'n' roll. They named each member of the Greek chorus-like trio after real-life girl groups and composed the prologue to begin as a dirge and quickly flip to something reminiscent of sock hop music. At the same time, they began leaning away from outright satire (leaving plenty of humor but stopping short of self-mockery) and injected plenty of earnestness and heart.

The production—playful and fun without losing its focus—was a hit. "*Rosewater* was about the plight of the disadvantaged, and it looked it. *Little Shop* wasn't so different thematically—it took place on Skid Row—but it was presented as psychedelic candy," remembers orchestrator Danny Troob. "The set was brightly colored, there were puppets, and you could enjoy it completely on those terms without ever understanding the political subtext." *(Playbill)*. The show opened at the WPA Theatre to sold out houses, and transferred to the Orpheum Theatre off-Broadway, where it ran for five years.

Little Shop propelled Howard Ashman and Alan Menken into the most lucrative years of their careers. They co-created the score for Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, and partnered with Tim Rice to write the music for *Aladdin*. They amassed Oscars, Grammys, and Golden Globes. Ashman and Menken famously nicknamed the song "Part of Your World" "Somewhere That's Wet," riffing on the *Little Shop* number to which it is so similar, and from which it so clearly sprang. Howard Ashman died in 1991, before two of the three films were released, but his influence on Disney music was era-defining. As Menken argued to *The New York Times*, Disney's animation renaissance gets its DNA from *Little Shop of Horrors*.

The Musical Influence Behind *Little Shop*

Doo-Wop: a subgenre of rhythm and blues, this musical style originated in Black communities around the 1940s, and is characterized by five key features, according to *The Complete Book of Doo-Wop*:

- Vocal music performed by a group
- Wide vocal range (bass to falsetto)
- Includes nonsense syllables (thus: "doo-wop")
- Simple instrumentation and rhythm
- Simple words and melody

Doo-wop groups were typically male and some groups, like the Crests and the Impalas, were racially integrated. Much like Tin Pan Alley songs, doo-wop songs often followed an AABA chorus structure, wherein the first, second, and fourth line are lyrically and melodically similar, whereas the third line—the B line—offers a contrasting harmony, melody, or "feel." Doo-wop was the predecessor to styles of music that had a more direct influence on *Little Shop of Horrors*, namely, early girl groups.

Girl Groups: the girl group craze began in the United States around 1958, when Elvis Presley entered the army, and began to wane around 1964 with the rise of the Beatles (although groups like the Supremes continued to churn out hits well beyond the girl group heyday). The music, especially at first, was bouncy and optimistic, and almost always addressed young love. Like doo-wop, it often included backup vocals—or even refrains—of nonsense syllables. The performers were mostly young Black women. Unlike rock and pop of later decades, the girl group music industry was characterized by a division of labor: the girls—they were often high schoolers—seldom wrote their own songs, and if they did, they rarely got credit. Teams of writers created most of the songs and passed them to producers who would distribute them to the various groups they managed. It was a uniquely disempowering system for the young performers, who worked entirely at the mercy of producers, often under contracts that shuttled most of the money in other directions. In the decades

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since, producers like Phil Spector have been sued by multiple groups for unpaid royalties. These are a few of the groups whose influence shines through in the music of *Little Shop of Horrors*:

- **The Crystals:** one of the first groups to sign on with Phil Spector's producing label, the Crystals benefitted from the "wall of sound" technique that the young Spector was developing. His rock orchestrations were unusually rich, multi-layered affairs that might feature five guitars, five pianos, and a massive percussion section. By 1963—two years after signing with Spector—the Crystals were topping charts across the US and internationally. They made Spector his first million dollars, but they themselves saw a relatively small portion of the money and later sued Spector for their share.
- **The Ronettes:** two sisters—Estelle and Ronnie Bennett—and their cousin, Nedra Talley, caught the eye of Phil Spector when they performed at the Brooklyn Fox Theater in 1963. Spector was especially taken by Ronnie's distinctive voice, which could effortlessly cut through his wall of sound, and signed the group to his label that year. The Ronettes became Spector's favorite group. Hits like "Be My Baby" rocketed to the top of the charts by October and cemented the Ronettes' stardom. They traveled with Dick Clark's Caravan of Stars and the Rolling Stones (the Stones opened for the Ronettes). Phil Spector and Ronnie Bennett married in 1968, but Phil grew increasingly controlling of Ronnie and her career, and Ronnie ended the marriage in 1973.
- **The Chiffons:** originally formed at a high school in the Bronx in 1960 under a different name, the group rebranded as the Chiffons in 1963 when they teamed up with songwriter Ronald Mack. Their first hit, "He's So Fine," made it to number one on the *Billboard* chart that spring. The Chiffons released their first LP, began touring, and released a second LP, all within a year. Although various group members left to take 9 to 5 jobs or went on maternity leave, the Chiffons still exist and were continuing to perform sporadically—with alternates and replacements—at least through 2023.
- **The Shangri-Las:** two sets of sisters who all started singing together at a high school in Queens, the Shangri-Las stand out for their rejection of the wide-eyed optimism of early girl groups. After signing on with Red Bird label in 1963, they recorded George Morton's song "Remember (Walking in the Sand)," which was a Billboard top 5 hit by 1964, and followed it with "Leader of the Pack," a track that includes the sound of a revving motorcycle (the song "Dentist!" from *Little Shop* pulls several lines from "Leader of the Pack"). Their songs are melodramatic and edgy. As lead singer Mary Weiss remembers "The Shangri-Las were punk before punk existed. People thought we were tough." When the Red Bird label disbanded in 1966, it spelled the end for the group, which, after lack of success at other record labels, dissolved.

Real-Life Skid Row

Origin of the Name: the term "skid row" comes from logging. Loggers would place skids on a street as part of the process of rolling their logs to port. When the work was done, they would sit on piles of extra skids, waiting to be picked up and transported back to logging camp. "Skid row" became a term associated with people stuck waiting around or possibly down on their luck.

Skid Row, LA: Director Roger Corman filmed several scenes of *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) on site in Los Angeles' Central City East neighborhood, better known by its nickname: Skid Row. LA's Skid Row was the last stop on the transcontinental railroad when it expanded south from Sacramento in the late 1880s. People heading west to seek a better life, having not found it yet, had little choice but to exit the train and start over then and there. Bars and cheap hotels sprung up to cater to the influx of people—mostly Civil War veterans, seasonal workers, and transient folk. The area became a haven for the dispossessed, and many people lived out of hotel rooms, in flophouses (barebones, affordable bunk rooms where a person could rent a bed), and on the streets. In the 1950s and 60s, the neighborhood came under government scrutiny for its proliferation of unsafe buildings. Faced with the choice to repair or forfeit, many building owners chose to let the city demolish their often-unprofitable hotels and apartment buildings. The housing stock of Skid Row went from 15,000 units to just 7,500. Through the 1970s, LA maintained a "containment" policy: the government allowed people to sleep in public spaces in Skid Row so that they would not do so elsewhere in the city. Skid Row spans approximately 54 city blocks and sits just north of LA's "flower district."

The Bowery, NYC: Known as "New York's Skid Row," the Bowery began as an affluent neighborhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1700s. By the mid-1800s, music halls, brothels, pawn shops, and flophouses brought in a less wealthy crowd, and gang activity brought the crime rate up. Still, the Bowery was a bustling corner of the city, and briefly became a safe haven for gay subculture across multiple social classes, until 1878, when the city constructed a branch of the Third Avenue Elevated Railway directly above Bowery Street. The neighborhood limped along afterwards, but the sunless streets, the intense noise and smoke of rail traffic, and the hot oil that dripped down from the rails onto shop wares made business unsustainable for many locals. By the 1920s, the Bowery was impoverished. It became an unofficial sanctuary for people who had no homes and few resources. The Third Avenue El was deconstructed in 1955, and in the 1970s, the city began a campaign to displace the "vagrant population" and make way for gentrification. Richard Kopperdahl—writer for *The New York Times* and former Bowery street-dweller—remarked in 2006, "There is no longer a skid row on the Bowery; it is a changing street with museums and expensive bars and hotels, and I, for one, think the city is poorer for no longer having a place where drunks and bums can go."

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A Satire Of...

Though Howard Ashman's author's note at the beginning of *Little Shop of Horrors* implores artistic teams to approach his script with honesty and empathy, he acknowledges that the show does, indeed, "satirize many things," including:

The Faust Legend: A persistent figure in Western folklore, Faust—who trades his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power—has been reimagined through literature and drama since the mid 1500s. Christopher Marlowe's Elizabethan drama, *The Tragical History of D. Faustus*, offers Faust's damnation as a cautionary tale and moral lesson. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's plays, *Faust, Parts One and Two*, written during the German Romanticism period and stuffed with cultural commentary, use Faust's journey to explore ambition, fulfillment, and the human condition, and end with Faust's salvation. Operas, musicals, and films similarly take on the Faust myth verbatim, coloring the story with perspectives of their time and deciding his fate anew, but sticking to familiar characters. Other works, however, like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Damn Yankees*, and *Little Shop of Horrors* use the Faustian Bargain as a premise for a new story.

- **Sturm und Drang:** a German phrase, usually translated to English as "Storm and Stress," that refers a movement in German music and literature in the late 1700s. It was characterized by emotional expression, subjectivity, and a rejection of Enlightenment-era rationalism. Playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was an early adopter of this style. The phrase is also featured in the "Prologue" of *Little Shop of Horrors*.

Horror (and the Monster Magazine): In the 1950s, nationwide concern over the dangers of reading comic books peaked. Inspired by Fredric Wertham's incendiary book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, the US Congress commenced a series of hearings in 1954 regarding the increase of violent, grotesque, and sexually explicit content foisted on the unsuspecting public by comic book publishers. Leaders in the comics industry saw the specter of government regulation looming and decided to act first: they formed the Comics Code Authority (CCA).

The new censorship organization had no power of enforcement, technically speaking, but now, without an official CCA stamp of approval on its cover, a comic book would struggle to find a distributor. And in order to earn that stamp, a comic had to follow strict regulations, like "No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title," "in every instance, good shall triumph over evil, and the criminal be punished for his misdeeds," and "scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited."

Comics like *Archie* thrived in this new publishing environment, but EC Comics (hitherto a popular horror-genre publishing house) became unprofitable almost immediately. EC shut down every comic but one, *MAD*, which they adapted to be *MAD Magazine*. The CCA, for all its control of the comics industry, had no authority over full-size, magazine format publications. Warren Publishing followed suit, quickly coming out with several black-and-white horror/sci-fi periodicals. And so began the heyday of the monster magazine.

Monster magazines created a horror subculture of sorts that did not adhere to the dominant narratives of the 1950s and 60s, even if the monsters themselves often represented common anxieties about communism and the atomic bomb. This subversion of the mainstream may hold extra appeal to the *Little Shop of Horrors* characters living on Skid Row, who have been left out of the middle-class prosperity blooming just a few miles away. In the original production, Crystal, Ronette, and Chiffon were depicted reading—and fighting over—monster magazines.

The Atomic B Movie and Cold War Sci-Fi: during the Cold War, the threat of external forces impinging on American life seemed dire, suspicion around espionage and betrayal was high, and the onset of the atomic age made humanity's self-destruction uncomfortably fathomable. It was a time of distilled, common fears. Horror flicks of the 1950s and 60s took those fears to market.

- *Them!* features monster ants made giant by radioactivity.
- *It Came from Beneath the Sea* involves a monster that resulted directly from nuclear testing.
- The film *The War of Worlds* portrays alien invaders that crash on American soil with intent to disrupt, conquer, and kill.
- In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the development of atomic weapons makes Earth a target for intergalactic obliteration.

While the original *Little Shop of Horrors* film does not trace Audrey II's origins to radioactivity, nor does it specify the plant's alien origins (the movie musical decides that Audrey II is from outer space, but original film makes no such assertion), it does offer a monster that embodies a broader threat to society, and it strives to brand that threat existential. The *Little Shop* stage musical stays true to this tradition of fictional monster representing threat-to-society monster, and pays homage to the B Movie genre throughout, including original stage directions that encourage Audrey to "pose like Fay Wray"—the leading lady of *King Kong*.

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The Greek Chorus

The Greek chorus is believed to be the precursor to Western theatre. Performances of choral dithyrambs—songs and dances to honor the god Dionysus—allegedly evolved into theatrical tragedy when leaders of the chorus began stepping out and performing as individuals. Over the years, as theatre expanded, the chorus shrank to accommodate, eventually disappearing from mainstream drama entirely. Ashman and Menken revived the tradition with the inclusion of Crystal, Ronette, and Chiffon in *Little Shop of Horrors*. Though distinctly reminiscent of the girl groups of the 1960s, the trio meets nearly all the basic requirements of a Greek chorus:

- The chorus begins the play, ushering the audience into the fictional world and introducing the given circumstances.
- The chorus speaks directly to the audience *and* to characters in the play.
- The chorus is typically represented as a somewhat homogenous group of people—similar in dress, context, and/or perspective.
- The chorus may pay homage to its dithyrambic origin by involving interludes of song and dance.
- Members of the chorus usually have some reason for being present—they might be local residents, friends of the protagonist, etc. As such, they also help to flesh out the contextual world of the play.
- As explained by Dr. Lucy Jackson of Durham University, the chorus is not merely an engine of commentary, but rather they may help to drive the action until their needs are met. The chorus may physically intervene with the protagonist or choose not to share information—Dr. Jackson argues that, in *Medea*, since the chorus overhears Medea's plan to kill her sons, they're making a clear choice to not tell anyone else: they allow it to occur.
  - There's room for interpretation here. Aristotle praised Sophocles for involving the chorus in his plot, whereas Euripides had (disappointingly, in Aristotle's opinion) kept the chorus entirely too separate, thus slowing down the action with choral interludes. Granted, Euripides wrote *Medea*, which Dr. Jackson interprets as having an active chorus, nonetheless.
- The chorus is made of somewhere between 12 and 50 actors. Here, the writers of *Little Shop* took inspiration from other sources to assemble their chorus of 3, namely, the 1960s music scene.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE 1950S AND EARLY 1960S

Suburban Sprawl and Levittown

The end of World War II marked a moment of uncertainty for the American economy. Wartime spending pulled the nation soundly out of the Great Depression, but now a sudden drop in demand for transport manufacturing and munitions—combined with the millions of soldiers returning home, looking for work—was about to force a massive shift. To preempt a dangerous spike in unemployment, Congress passed the Serviceman's Readjustment Act in 1944. The act guaranteed federal aid to any veteran wishing to buy a home or obtain a secondary education. At least in theory. Black veterans were denied home loans by private mortgage companies and refused entry by suburban neighborhood covenants—roadblocks entirely beyond the purview of the legislation. For white veterans, though, the act was a windfall. Later known simply as the G.I. Bill, it kicked off a period of prosperity wherein home ownership and higher education were within reach for a larger proportion of the population than ever before. The post-war years thus began with a massive, albeit selective, expansion of the American middle class.

One side effect of this subsidized prosperity was the baby boom, and as the birth rate soared and families grew, so did demand for housing. Corporations like Levitt & Sons stepped in to solve a modern problem with a modern solution. Tract houses—uniform, easy-to-assemble, affordably designed homes—started multiplying on the Levitts' newly acquired Long Island farmland in 1947. The Levitts built their houses assembly-line style, in 27 steps, with each construction worker specializing in a single task for maximum efficiency. Levittown offered young families a chance to escape the noise of the city without sacrificing proximity to amenities. It was designed with meandering, curving streets to set it apart from the urban grid, and it was famously and determinedly homogenous. No resident could hang laundry on a line outside, nor have more than two dogs, nor neglect to mow the lawn once a week between April and November. Levittown set the stage for many such tract house developments throughout the next decade. According to *The New York Times*, approximately one million white people left New York City in favor of the suburbs during the 1960s. This phenomenon occurred in cities across the country and is sometimes remembered as "white flight."

Even though Bill Levitt refused to sell brand new tract homes to anyone besides white veterans, a Levittown family moving away could sell to anyone they chose. Still, suburban neighborhoods remained largely racially homogenous, even when a Black family managed to secure a home loan, despite the considerable barriers. This was in part thanks to the Home Owners Loan Corporation, which fueled the anti-integration flames by developing a rating system that downgraded desegregated neighborhoods. Discrimination thus became a matter of property value, down to the numeral. Black families who moved in were often faced with violent discrimination. This meant many families of color had no choice but to stay in the city, even as white neighbors moved away in droves, leaving closed storefronts behind and taking their tax dollars with them.

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Consumerism and the Golden Age of Advertising

The upswing in home ownership in the 1950s and 60s came with a new wave of material needs. In the first four years after WWII ended, consumer spending on furniture alone increased 240%. Living in suburbia meant that many people suddenly required an automobile to commute to work; by 1960, an estimated 73% of American families owned their own car. But even after these freshly defined necessities were acquired, the average middle-class family likely had some extra money left to lay at the altar of good, American consumerism.

The beginning of the 20th century had brought the invention of the modern air conditioner, the vacuum cleaner, and the electric washing machine. Electric refrigerators came on the domestic scene in the 1920s, and clothes dryers first became available in the 1930s. The 1940s brought the deep freezer and the microwave oven. The 1950s made them all affordable for the middle-class consumer, thanks to a boom in mass production, an increase in income relative to cost of living, and the advent of the credit card. But with so many products flooding the market, the consumer needed to be persuaded which life-changing new product to buy first.

By 1960, with a TV in 90% of American homes, advertisers had thoroughly seized the opportunity to market goods straight into the family living room. Many ads adopted a strategy of selling a way of life via their product, rather than simply marketing the product itself. The dominant narratives? Ease and status. Housewives were primary targets for the former. Toasters, stand mixers, double ovens, dishwashers, combined refrigerator-freezers, washing machines, drying machines, and electric irons were all marketed as dreamy new remedies to the labors of keeping house and a sure way to show off one's wifely competence. Many ads—especially those aiming at men—tended to emphasize the product in question as a status symbol, playing on the rising prosperity of the middle class and the accessibility of items previously only available to the affluent.

The ads worked—but so did a nationwide shift in perspective regarding frugality and consumption. As Victor Lebow, a retail analyst, noted in 1955, "our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption." To keep the economy healthy, in other words, every good citizen had to pull out their purse. The country's sheer level of productivity demanded it. If the post-Depression wartime boom proved anything, it was that spending money was patriotic.

The Second Red Scare

The Cold War brought a new era of suspicion into American politics and life. One prevailing fear was of domestic espionage—sleeper agents and disillusioned converts to communism spying for the Soviet Union from across the garden fence and within the American government itself. In 1938, the committee that would come to be known as HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) formed to investigate Nazi activity and quickly pivoted its focus to communism. In 1947, a new Executive Order required loyalty screenings for civil-service employees. These measures epitomized the culture of distrust that only intensified with the conviction of Alger Hiss in 1950 and the execution of the Rosenbergs for espionage in 1953.

As HUAC gained notoriety under Joe McCarthy's leadership and the FBI employed guerilla tactics in its effort to flush out domestic communists and spies, projecting an image of American-ness became a matter of social and personal security. And what must an American look like? Unlike the communists, an American must believe in God, of course. Unlike the communists, American women didn't have to work; they could focus on raising the next generation of patriots (at least, according to the propaganda). Unlike the communists, an American must stand by the freedom that a capitalist system guaranteed.

Granted, this moral panic was met with resistance: starting with The Hollywood Ten—ten accused artists who refused to name names to HUAC—hundreds of people were blacklisted from the film and music industries for failing to betray their colleagues. Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible* (1953), likens McCarthyism to a witch trial. President Truman remarked that McCarthy's ruthless inquisition probably did more to help the communist cause than dissuade people from it. But the threat of nuclear annihilation by the Soviet Union gave McCarthy and his allies ground to stand on, and placed heavy moral weight on conforming to the existing American social order.

Gender Norms:

"Domestic containment" was a key anti-communist strategy in the mid-20th century. The nuclear family, as the theory went, was a bastion against the uncertainty and temptation of encroaching communist forces. Father would work to provide for everyone; Mother would keep the home and nurture the children. It would be a small, tight-knit family unit of good, American values, with no room for deviant ideas to slip in unnoticed. Domestic containment was perceived as such a guarantee of stability that the government was willing to invest in it: in 1948, Congress came out with the joint tax return, creating a new monetary incentive for the nuclear family.

Tax incentives combined with the thriving economy of the 1950s and the helping hand of the G.I. Bill to make married life attractive, indeed. The cultural emphasis on conformity (compounded by the Second Red Scare) and the shift in media representation after the war (encouraging women to leave their jobs and return to the home) made marriage seem imperative for women, especially. Divorce rates fell. Marriage rates rose rapidly—by 1950, around 82% of women between 18 and 64 were married. As Betty Friedan observed in *The Feminine Mystique*, the number of women seeking psychiatric help also rose, though helpful treatment was hard to come by. Plenty of women still worked. In fact, the percentage of women in the workforce rose by at least 5% between 1950 and 1960, but the media idealized the image of the woman-as-wife—subservient, patriotic, and ambitious only in her pursuit of a perfect home and a happy family.

Men were allowed far more autonomy than women, though the standards of idealized masculinity were nonetheless rigid. The iconic mid-century man—portrayed in advertisement and in popular 1950s/60s TV shows

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like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*—put on his suit in the morning and spent the day earning his keep in the great American capitalist system. He respected his boss, worked hard, and came home at the end of the day to his adoring family, dinner already on the table. If he had flashbacks of the war, he didn't let it show. As the head of the household, he could confidently take charge of family business, dole out advice and gentle reprimands, and trust that his word would be heeded above all.

Despite fierce marketing, economic incentives, and a massive cultural shift towards viewing conformity as merit, the rigid gender ideals of the 1950s and early 60s failed to produce the uniform, stable society they promised. Whether because the ideal was unattainable (men struggling to achieve the mastery over self/career/family that was sold to them as effortless), because its reality turned out to be more complex than popular media portrayed it (women struggling to find a sense of self and purpose while facing a lifetime of laundry and dishes) or because the ideal excluded certain people entirely (the idealized family was essentially straight, white, able-bodied, and middle class), the orthodox norms of the 1950s gave rise to an anti-establishment counterculture and movements for social change in the decades to follow.

FLOWERY FUN FACTS

Strange and Interesting Plants

Venus Flytrap: a carnivorous plant native to the east coast of the United States. The plant has a jaw-like structure covered in hairs that sense vibration when an insect lands. If the hairs are stimulated more than once within 20 or 30 seconds, the jaw is triggered to clamp shut. This double-checking method prevents energy loss in the case of a non-prey stimulus (a leaf, a raindrop) landing in the plant's jaw. The hairs are heat-sensitive and will cause the plant to close itself against the threat of forest fire.

Rafflesia: also known as the "stinking corpse lily." A parasitic genus of plants whose flowers grow to around 40 inches in diameter—the largest ever recorded was almost 4 feet across. The flowers evolved to both smell and look like rotting flesh, which attracts carrion flies that in turn aid in pollination. Scientists note the parasitic plant's unusual ability to exchange genes with the tissue of its host vine, a phenomenon usually associated with bacteria and viruses, but not traditionally demonstrated in more complex organisms.

Mimosa pudica: also called "sensitive plant." Part of the legume family, its leaves fold closed immediately in response to touch or disturbance. Recent studies found that the plant is able to habituate to repeated stimulus—in other words, it can learn that a given disturbance is non-harmful and may reopen to it, while still folding in response to other stimuli.

Yareta: also spelled Llareta. A flowering plant that grows at high altitudes in the Andes and resembles a large pile of moss. It grows in dense colonies, close to the ground, with wax covered leaves—all adaptations that help it survive the cold, dry, windy climate of the high grasslands. It grows about 1.5cm per year, and many Yareta blobs are estimated to be at least 3,000 years old.

Parachute Plant: an evergreen, flowering plant with a built-in flytrap, meant more for kidnapping bugs than consuming them. The plant gives off a scent that is attractive to flies. The flies come to investigate the smell, climb through the gaps between petals, and are trapped in the tube-like base of the flower by the plant's downward-pointing hairs. When the flower dies, its internal hairs weaken, and the fly—now covered in pollen—is finally released.

The Rose Bowl

"The Rose Parade" is an annual event held in Pasadena, California, on or around January 1. It involves elaborate floats made of flowers. The parade, also called the "Tournament of Roses" takes place in the morning and is typically followed by an afternoon college football game called "The Rose Bowl." The parade began in 1890 as a way for California to advertise and celebrate itself as a wintertime paradise. The game in began 1902 to help cover the cost of the parade. Every year since 1927, there's been an annual theme, including "We're Going to Win" (1943), "Famous Books in Flowers" (1954), "Around the World in Flowers" (1962), and "Best Day Ever!" (2025).

American Botanical "Geniuses"

- **Asa Gray:** a Massachusetts-born botanist who compiled the results of his of broad study of North American plants into a book, nicknamed *Gray's Manual*. Published in 1848, it remains one of the central taxonomic manuals for botanists studying the region today. Gray was also responsible for creating the botany department at Harvard University.
- **Luther Burbank**: a botanist and horticulturalist who developed hundreds of new plant varieties, including the russet Burbank potato, which is now the primary potato used by the American food processing industry. His potato also helped restore Ireland's crop after the Great Famine, due to its resistance to blight.
- **George Washington Carver:** an agricultural chemist, Carver was the director of the department of agriculture at the Tuskegee Institute. He dedicated his life and research to improving the lives of Black farmers, especially sharecroppers, discovering that peanuts and soybeans could restore nitrogen to the depleted soil of former cotton fields. When it became clear that market demand for these crops was too low, he invented 300 useful derivatives of the peanut alone, including plastics, cosmetics, inks, dyes, and milk.
- **Elzada Clover and Lois Jotter:** pioneers in the study of American desert biomes, Clover and her grad student, Jotter, embarked on an unprecedented botanical expedition in 1938. Along with a small crew, the two traveled the Colorado river by boat, studying the flora of the canyons. They were the first Western scientists to catalogue the plants inside the Grand Canyon (discovering a number of unknown species and encountering evidence that helped disprove long-standing theories regarding ecological zones), and the first non-Indigenous women to successfully raft the canyon's full length.

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- **Barbara McClintock:** a Nobel Prize-winning biologist, McClintock's analysis of the maize plant allowed her to prove that chromosomes are the basis of genetics, and to trace the movement of specific genes that caused mutations across generations. Although she made most of these discoveries in the 1930s and 40s, she was largely ignored until the 1970s, when other scientists were able to verify her results with their own studies. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1983.

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Pre-Performance Questions

1. Have you seen the play or movie *Little Shop of Horrors* before? If so, what do you remember from the story and what do you expect to see?
2. How do we weigh what we want to get with the consequences of what our actions might be? What is the price one pays for fame and fortune?

Post-Performance Questions

1. How did the performance align with your preconceived idea or memory of the play? Were there any surprises?
2. How do the technical elements of scenic, costume, sound, and lighting design enhance the story?
3. Although the play is set in the early 1960s, how does the play reflect what is happening today?
4. How does the puppetry enhance the story? How does the puppet change through the course of the play?
5. Compare and contrast the relationship that Audrey has with Seymour and with Orin.
6. Why does Seymour continue to feed Audrey II? Do you agree with the decisions that Seymour makes? When do you think that Seymour has hit a point of no return?
7. In what ways are the characters of Ronnette, Chiffon, and Crystal important to the storytelling?
8. Describe what this play says about economic classes and capitalism.
9. How does Mr. Mushnik treat Seymour? Does this change during the course of the play? Why/Why not?
10. How does the play comment on gender roles in the 1950s and 60s? How does this reflect the time period?
11. What happens to Audrey II after the play has ended?

Activities

Perspective Writing – Character Narrative

1. Have students select a moment from *Little Shop of Horrors*. This should be a moment that has more than one person in attendance. For example, the first meeting of Seymour and Audrey.
2. From this moment, the students are to pick a character from the play and, in their own words (paraphrase), provide the character's perspective and attitude of what transpired, specifically exploring emotions, behavior, and how the moment affects the character.
3. Based on their exploration of a moment from the play, each student will write a short monologue describing the moment from the character's perspective of what they experienced.
4. Compare the monologues about the event to the perspectives of other characters who were involved. Discuss the similarities and differences that arose during the writing process. Was there general agreement of what happened or marked differences? Why were the moments similar or different? Were they subtle or obvious variations? Did students agree on what was important to include and why? If not, how would the elimination of some elements change the way the moment would be understood or remembered by the character?

Writing PG: Articulate the position of self and others using experiential and material logic.
Writing PG: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

Create a parody song, Audrey III

1. Select an inanimate object that is found in a classroom, an office or a department store. Give the object some physical characteristics of a human. Write a short paragraph describing what the object now looks like with these new personified characteristics.
2. Decide what this newly animate object wants from the world and what it needs to survive.
3. Select a favorite song from a musical or from a contemporary artist. Change the words to a verse and chorus by incorporating what the object needs and how it is going to get what it wants.
4. Compare the new parody songs.

Writing PG: Articulate the position of self and others using experiential and material logic.
Writing PG: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

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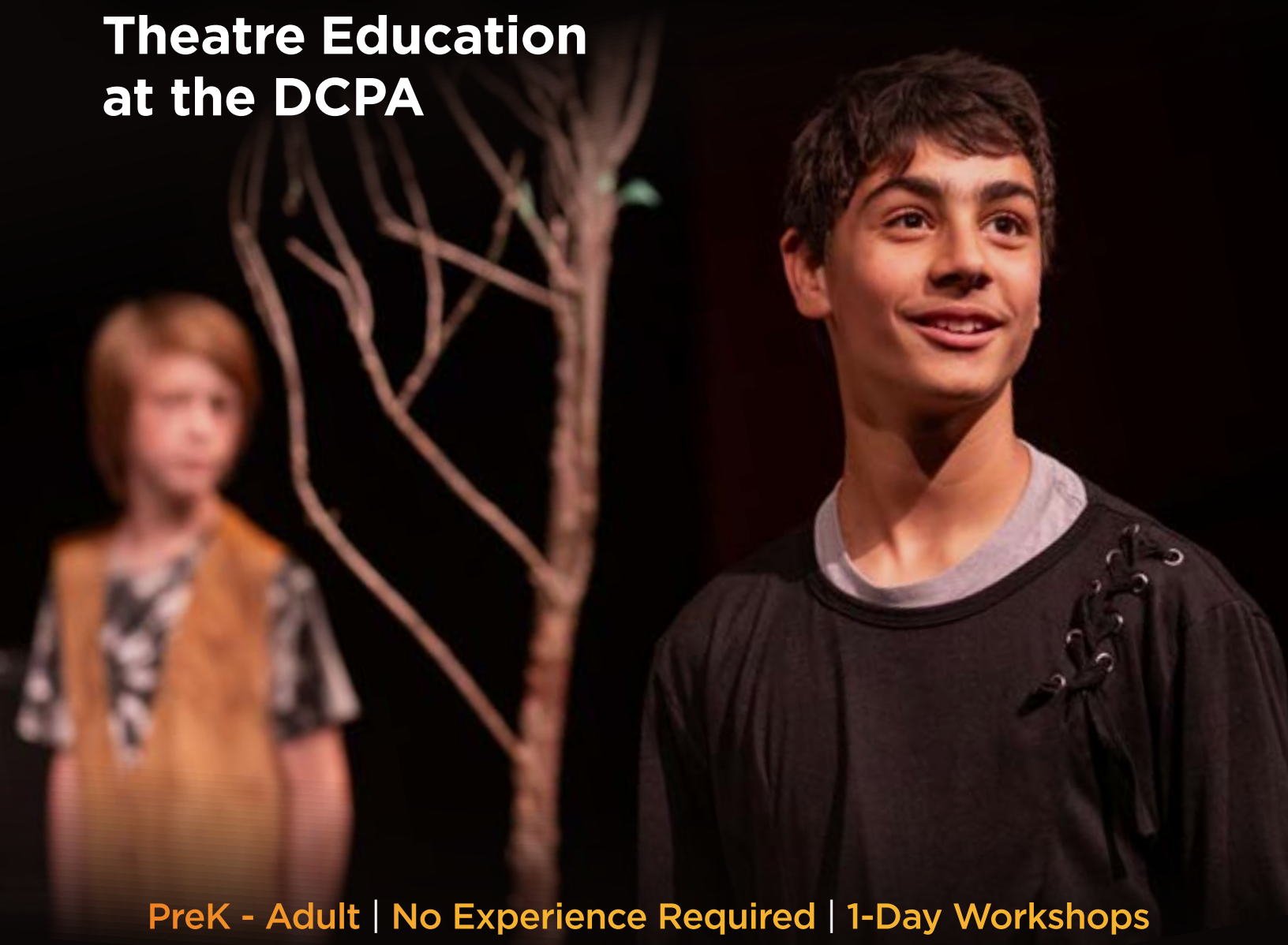

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