

# STUDY GUIDE

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## BUYING THE FARM

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# ***BUYING THE FARM***

By Shelley Hoffman & Stephen Sparks

## **STUDY GUIDE**

Created by Sarah Farrant

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## PLAYWRIGHTS

*Buying the Farm* was co-authored by partners, **Shelley Hoffman and Stephen Sparks**. Shelley Hoffman is a winner of the 2008 Gemini Award for Best Writing in a Children's or Youth Program or Series for the animated series *Iggy Arbuckle*.

## CHARACTERS

Character descriptions provided by the Playwrights:

### Esme Van Fossen

Smart as a whip and capable as any farmer, Esme arrived at her great uncle's farm in the middle of her university degree. She's been Magnus' right hand man for the past 4 months but refuses to reveal exactly why she ended up on his doorstep.

### Brad Deacon

A city-boy with a good heart, Brad studied to be an architect, but now finds himself working for his Real Estate broker dad. Determined to make this deal come through, Brad truly feels it will be the best for all concerned. But meeting Magnus and Esme changes his idea of what that means.

### Magnus Bjornson

Wry and weathered, Magnus has been working the family farm all his life and for a good deal of that time, by himself. A pragmatic man with a good sense of humoUr (prone to gentle teasing), Magnus loves his farm and truly loves and admires his grandniece, Esme.



Port Stanley Festival's 2018 premiere of *Buying the Farm* [\(source\)](#)



## PLOT SYNOPSIS

Real estate agent Brad Deacon arrives at the Bjornson farm ready to make a deal! Wearing a plaid button down shirt, two hundred dollar jeans, and Dan Post lizard skin cowboy boots, he rehearses a 'homesy' opening. He's ready, right? Well, a slow clap from Esme reveals that he neither looks nor acts the part. Magnus interrupts Brad's pitch demanding that he "talk simple" instead of using words such as "consortium." It is only once Brad is covered in pine gum that Magnus compliments, "Now you look more like a farmer and less like one of those catalogue models." However, it turns out not being "as polished as the other salesman" is "not such a bad thing." Let's find out if he strikes a deal before his plan goes up in smoke!



*Port Stanley Festival's 2018 premiere of Buying the Farm* ([source](#))

### Act 1

Magnus Bjornson demonstrates little interest in listening to Brad's pitch and instead recruits him to assist with farm chores, finding entertainment in his own indecision as Brad struggles to haul a gear box back and forth between two spots. While Magnus gets Brad to transport and dismantle the gearbox, Esme "[gives him] the gears." Esme echoes Magnus' resistance to sell—even at Brad's high price of one million, two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Magnus explains that she lives up to her title as "great niece"; not only can she bake "a top-notch loaf of bread" she's "top of her class." Both Magnus and Brad fail to understand why she's back at the farm where she used to be "loaned" as a child to Magnus by his sister. It becomes unclear what Magnus would do without her when she discovers that he has not picked up his prescriptions for his atrial fibrillation. She warns Brad that he cannot use the knowledge of Magnus' condition to manipulate him into selling the farm. Brad doesn't. What he does do is inform her that her uncle owes "a hefty sum" to the bank," a loan they could call in at any time. Esme interprets this threat and, against her uncle's invitation to Brad to stay for dinner, demands that he "Get off [their] land." Conveniently, Brad's "flashy German car" won't start, and he is forced to head off into town on foot. Magnus and Esme jokingly warn him about snakes and bears, but forget to warn him about the real threat, skunks.



*Port Stanley Festival's 2018 premiere of [Buying the Farm](#)* [\[source\]](#)

## **Act 2**

A naked Brad is in a washtub in the middle of the yard soaking in hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, and dish liquid; it turns out using tomato juice is “just an old wife’s tale put out by those sneaky tomato farmers.” Magnus serves Brad dinner in the tub by putting a piece of plywood across the tub as a tray. While Magnus politely indicates that he’s going to eat “upwind,” Esme unapologetically ignores him. That is until Brad reminds Magnus that he should be taking his pills with dinner. This helps Esme to see that “city-ots aren’t all bad” and offer to drive him back into the city this time. Coincidentally, her truck won’t start either. It turns out Magnus may be a better performer than Brad, as he stages a stroke to get Brad and Esme to see the good in each other. Unfortunately, they just can’t stop fighting over what’s going to happen to his farm. Finally, Magnus announces his intentions: he wants it to become a park. Although there is no cell service, Brad is able to make a quick call on the landline to his father, who happens to be not only the real estate agent but the developer, and gets him to make a deal: He will buy Mr. Bjornson’s land for a price high enough to settle his debts and let him retire. Meanwhile, another deal is struck: Magnus agrees to go and get tests on his heart done as long as Esme talks to the doctor about her feelings of sadness at school. Not only do Brad and Esme see the good in each other, Esme acknowledges that Brad “did good.” With that, the deal is sealed with a kiss.

## CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The continuation of Canada's urbanization trend was confirmed in Statistic Canada's 2016 census. This trend, referred to as "urban spread" or "urban sprawl" is addressed in *Buying the Farm*.

ESME

*Yeah, all you know about is chewing up farms and spitting out urban sprawl.*

BRAD

*Hey, what we're planning isn't urban sprawl. It's a development that's going to bring a lot of benefits to the whole community.*

ESME

*Benefits? You mean acres and acres of good farmland paved over with street after street of the same particle board, tickytack houses with faux stone siding and granite countertops-*

As of 2011, 81 per cent of Canadians lived in an urban centre, which is defined by Statistics Canada as a community with 1000 residents or more. Despite being the second largest country in the world, Canada has relatively little reliable farmland. Approximately 5 per cent of Canada's entire land mass is suitable for farming. In the past few decades, urbanization has consumed 7400 square kilometres of dependable farmland. Subdivisions, strip malls, and highways are where farmland used to be. Almost half of Canada's urban centres have replaced land that was being farmed only a few generations ago.

The Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) is Canada's most populated and fastest growing region, as well as the location of most of Canada's Class 1 soils. About half of the land in the GGH is farmland. Approximately 42 per cent of Ontario's best farmland is in the region. Accordingly, the farmland in the GGH contributes \$11 billion and 38 000 jobs to Ontario's economy. It is estimated that over 50 per cent of the Ontario's \$20 billion in imported food products *could* be produced in the province itself.

The Greenbelt Plan (2005) identifies where urbanization should not occur in order to preserve and protect the agricultural land within the Greenbelt boundaries. However, agricultural land in the Greater Golden Horseshoe outside the Greenbelt is vulnerable to development. In addition to stimulating the economy through agricultural production, natural spaces clean the air, provide drinking water, host a diversity of habitats including those of pollinators, and offer opportunities for recreational activities that promote public health and a high quality of life.

## GLOSSARY

**¡ándele!**: A Spanish colloquial expression used to encourage.

**Al Fresco**: In open air.

**Atrial Fibrillation**: Also referred to as Afib or AF, it is a type of irregular heart rhythm. The risk of developing AF increases with age and the presence of other conditions including diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Stroke and heart failure are main complications. Afib affects approximately 350 000 Canadians.

**Back in a Jiff**: An informal way of saying, “I’ll be back soon!”

**Belt Sander**: A powerful and aggressive sander, designed to strip wood as fast as possible.

**Bumper Crop**: A crop that has yielded an unusually productive harvest; a large crop.

**Chord of Wood**: It is the amount of firewood that when aligned, parallel, touching, and compact occupies a volume of 128 cubic feet or about 3.6 metres. The cord is a legal unit of measure when selling bulk firewood in Canada, though Measurement Canada suggests it be discontinued since it is largely misunderstood and misused by individuals selling firewood.

**City-ot**: Rhymes with “idiot” and is intended to suggest that someone from the city is ignorant of certain things.

**Computer Combine**: A modern combine is a machine designed to efficiently harvest grain crops; an operator drives the combine through a field of crops and the machine cuts, threshes, and cleans the grains automatically. Prior to the development of

what Magnus refers to as “computer combines,” farmers and workers had to harvest crops by cutting down the plants with a scythe, separating the edible grain from the inedible chaff by beating the cut stalks (threshing) and cleaning any lingering debris away from the seeds so that they could be processed in a mill.

**Dan Post**: An iconic western brand introduced in the 1960s known for crafting boots with exotic skins and premium leathers.

**Distributor Cap**: An insulated, removable component that covers the distributor and rotor in a gasoline engine and distributes electrical current to the spark plugs.

**Diltiazem**: A medication used to prevent chest pain and increase the ability to exercise by relaxing blood vessels and lowering the heart rate.

**Dungarees**: Another term for jeans, or trousers made from denim.

**Engine Block**: Also known as a cylinder block, it contains all of the major components that comprise the bottom end of a motor.

**Felling Trees**: The process of cutting down individual trees.

**Frat Boy**: A young man who behaves in a boisterous or foolish manner considered typical of members of some college or university fraternities.

**Furrow**: A trench in the earth made by a plow.

**Gear Box**: A set of gears within its casing, used in motor vehicles.

**Giant Tiger:** A Canadian discount store.

**Gummed Up:** Covered in a sticky substance.

**Heft:** To lift or carry something heavy.

**Hydraulics:** The process of using pressurized liquid to generate mechanical power. It also refers to a system added to a vehicle which can raise or lower the vehicle on command.

**Kajiji:** A mispronunciation of Kijiji, an online platform which enables Canadians to connect locally to exchange goods and services.

**Lightweight:** Lightweight typically refers to someone who cannot handle consuming much alcohol. When Esme calls Brad as a lightweight she is referring to his inability to handle the sight of blood, as he becomes queasy when she speaks of draining the blood from her nail.

**Muck Out the Stables:** This means to clean out the stables, specifically the excrement and old straw.

**Paddock:** A small, usually enclosed field near a stable or barn used for pasturing or exercising animals.

**Parcel:** Referring to a parcel or extended area of land.

**Party Line:** A telephone circuit shared by multiple telephone service subscribers.

**Pitch a Fit:** To become very upset and angry in a loud and uncontrolled way.

**Play Hardball:** To be ruthless, aggressive, or harsh in order to achieve a certain result.

**Sasquatch-Sized:** Enormous, referring to a Sasquatch or Bigfoot which is said to be an ape-like creature.

**Stem to Gudgeon:** A saying that means “front to back” derived from nautical terminology. A stem is the curved upright timber at the bow of a vessel, and the gudgeon is a metal socket in which the pintle of a rudder fits, allowing it to swing. The bow is the front or forward part of a ship and a rudder is usually fastened to the stern or back of a sailboat.

**Switzerland:** Switzerland is a country in Europe known for being neutral in warfare. Therefore, when someone says, “I’m Switzerland” they mean they’re not taking sides.

**Unka:** Another way of saying “uncle.”

**Warfarin:** A medication commonly known as a “blood thinner” which helps keep blood flowing smoothly in your body by decreasing the amount of clotting proteins.

**Wide Berth:** A reasonable distance away from someone or something.

**Winch:** A device or machine for hauling or pulling. It is made up of a rope, cable, or chain wound around a horizontal rotating drum and turned by a crank or motor and typically mounted at the rear of a towing vehicle.

**Young Buck:** A teenager or young adult male.



## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

<b>Drama (Senior Years)</b>	Creating (CR): The learner generates, develops, and communicates ideas for creating drama/theatre.	DR-1: The learner generates ideas from a variety of sources for creating drama/theatre.
	Connecting (C): The learner develops understanding about the significance of the dramatic arts by making connections to various times, places, social groups, and cultures.	DR-C1: The learner develops understandings about people and practices in the dramatic arts.
		DR-C2: The learner develops understanding about the influence and impact of the dramatic arts.
	Responding (R): The learner uses critical reflection to inform drama/theatre learning and to develop agency and identity.	DR-R1: The learner generates initial reactions to drama/theatre experiences.
		DR-R2: The learner critically observes and describes drama/theatre experiences.
		DR-RW: The learner analyzes and interprets drama/theatre experiences.
		DR-R4: The learner applies new understandings about drama/theatre to construct identity and to act in transformative ways.
<b>English Language Arts</b>	Explore Thoughts, Ideas, Feelings, and Experiences	1.1.1: Express Ideas- Question and reflect on personal responses, predictions, and interpretations; apply personal viewpoints to diverse situations or circumstances.
	Comprehend and Respond Personally and Critically to Oral, Print, and Other Media Texts	2.1.1: Prior Knowledge- Analyze and explain connections between previous experiences, prior knowledge, and a variety of texts.
		2.2.1: Experience Various Texts- Experience texts from a variety of forms and genres and cultural traditions; explain various interpretations of the same text.

		2.2.2: Connects Self, Texts, and Culture- Examine how personal experiences, community traditions, and Canadian perspectives are presented in oral, literary, and media texts.
		2.2.3: Appreciate the Artistry of Texts- Discuss how word choice and supporting details in oral, literary, and media texts [including books, drama, and oral presentations] affect purpose and audience.
	Experiment with Language	2.3.4: Examine creative uses of language in popular culture, recognize how figurative language and techniques create a dominant interpretation, mood, tone, and style.
	Manage Ideas and Information	3.2.5: Make Sense of Information- Identify a variety of factors that affect meaning; scan to locate specific information quickly; summarize, report, and record main ideas of extended oral, visual, and written texts.
	Celebrate and Build Community	5.2.2: Relate Texts to Culture- Explain ways in which oral, literary, and media texts relate topics and themes in life.
		5.2.3: Appreciate Diversity- Reflect on ways in which the choices and motives of individuals encountered in oral, literary, and media texts provide insight into those of self and others; discuss personal participation and responsibilities in a variety of communities.

## ACTIVITIES FOR EDUCATORS

### Thinking About the Play

The following questions can be used for class discussion, responses, or in some cases, essay topics:

1. We know that Brad Deacon is 27. Why would the casting call ask for males mid-20s to mid-30s?
2. Does the play combat or perpetuate stereotypes of people from the city versus the country?
3. What suggests that Brad is “playing a part?”
4. Why does Esme call Brad a “city-ot?” Do you think that’s justified?
5. What character do you think has the best sense of humour? Why?
6. What benefits of communities being developed does Brad highlight?
7. If Magnus claims he does not want to have a stroke, why do you think he is resistant to taking his medication?
8. What is the significance of Brad being dressed in Magnus’ clothes at the end of the play?
9. What do you think about Magnus’ desire for his farm to be a park?
10. What did Brad learn on the farm?
11. Why do you think Esme doesn’t want to talk to anyone about why she left school?
12. What character do you relate to the most?
13. What is a lesson or message you took away from the play?
14. Does this play make life on a farm seem appealing to you?
15. Do you feel pressure to have a certain career?
16. Where do you go to feel peaceful and/or safe?

17. Would you recommend *Buying the Farm* to theatregoers? Why or why not?

18. What would you change about the staging (set, costumes, props) of the play?

### Poster Investigation

Examine Royal MTC's poster for the show. Consider prompts such as:

- *What symbols do you spot?*
- *What is their significance?*
- *Why would a skunk replace what would normally be a rooster on the weathervane?*
- *Why is the S for south a dollar sign?*



### Infographic Creation

Create an infographic informing the public about urbanization and/or the farmland, such as the one below:





### **A Picture is Worth 1000 Words**

Explain how this picture relates to the play:



### **Children's Series Connections**

Watch an episode of *Iggy Arbuckle*. Are there any common themes between the children's program and the play?

### **Casting Considerations**

We're unsure of exactly how old Magnus Bjornson is, though we do know he is approaching retirement. The casting call asks for men in their late 40s to 60s. How can costuming and make-up make someone appear older? What kinds of vocal strategies and gestures could be used to make someone appear older?

### **The Perfect Pitch**

Write a spiel for Brad to pitch to Magnus Bjornson that would convince him to sell his farm. Use persuasive writing techniques.

### **Scene It**

*Buying the Farm* has two authors. Co-write an additional scene (perhaps a sequel) with a peer. Consider using Google Docs so that you can collaborate on the same document regardless of your location.

### **Non-verbal Exercise**

Use facial expressions and gestures to convey your emotions (such as desperation, frustration, etc.) while seeking cell service when there is no reception.

## Telephone

Magnus is on a party line, meaning every one on the line can listen in on each other's conversations. As a warm-up, play the game "Telephone:" Participants stand in a circle or a straight line close together. The first person in the circle or line whispers a word or phrase in the ear of the person sitting or standing to their right. Participants whisper the message to their neighbours until it reaches the last person in line. The last person says the message out loud so that everyone can hear how it has changed.

## Word Play

The playwrights like to "play" with words! Explain how the wordplay adds humour.

MAGNUS - Coffee will be ready about now. How about fixing me a cup?

ESME - How about fixing the truck?

MAGNUS - Don't want it changed. Drop it.

BRAD - What?

MAGNUS - Drop it.

BRAD - But you haven't even heard my offer.

MAGNUS - The wood. Drop it.

*Brad waits to see if this part of his offer has landed. Still examining the ax, Magnus shakes his head.*

MAGNUS - Split.

BRAD - But if you'll just let me stay to tell you my-

*Magnus pulls a long length of twine out of his pocket and starts wrapping it tightly around where the ax handle attaches to the blade.*

MAGNUS - No. My ax. The handle is starting to split. Wouldn't want to have the head fly off. *(he looks at Brad)* Might hurt somebody...

## Farm to Table

Choose a local food and write a research report on how that food is grown or raised and the process of going from farm to table.

Extension: Write a recipe that features this food.

## RESOURCES

<https://royalmtc.ca/Contact-Us/Opportunities/Auditions/Buying-The-Farm-Audition-Notice.aspx>

<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1903262/awards>

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/urbanization>

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/census-2016-big-canadian-cities-see-urban-spread-but-rural-communities-wane/article33949353/>

<https://www.canadiangeographic.ca/article/mapping-40-years-canadian-urban-expansion>

<https://davidsuzuki.org/what-you-can-do/discourage-urban-sprawl/>

[https://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/2013/02/21/urban\\_sprawl\\_is\\_destroying\\_ontario\\_farmland.html](https://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/2013/02/21/urban_sprawl_is_destroying_ontario_farmland.html)

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<https://www.explainthatstuff.com/howcombineharvesterswork.html>

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<http://verbmall.blogspot.com/2006/12/gudgeon-goes-to-hawaii.html>

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bumper\\_crop](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bumper_crop)

<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/play+hardball>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felling>

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<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pitch%20a%20fit>

<https://www.webmd.com/drugs/2/drug-3783-276/diltiazem-oral/diltiazem-tablet-oral/details>

<https://www.webmd.com/drugs/2/drug-3949/warfarin-oral/details>

<https://www.wordnik.com/words/young%20buck>

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/winch>

<https://www.honkforhelp.com/explore/2015/whats-a-winch-and-how-it-works/>

<https://haynes.com/en-us/tips-tutorials/what-is-engine-block-what-does-it-do>

<https://toolsfirst.com/what-is-belt-sander/>

<http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Page13783.aspx>

<https://d36rd3gki5z3d3.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2015-11-18-Farmland-at-Risk-highres-WEB.pdf?x47766>

<https://environmentaldefence.ca/2015/11/24/ontario-farmland-at-risk-better-land-use-planning-can-help-save-the-family-farm/>

## **STUDY GUIDE CREATOR BIOGRAPHY**

Sarah is thrilled to be maintaining a long-distance relationship as a study guide creator with the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre from her hometown in Ontario. She is very passionate about the incorporation of arts in education, as she graduated from Western University with an Honours Specialization in English and Drama, as well as a Bachelor of Education. Sarah has been involved with a number of theatrical productions, both on and off stage. She has experience working with youth in a variety of capacities, including at a childcare centre, tutoring service, and day camp, as well as in elementary and secondary schools locally and overseas. When she is not creating activities for other educators, she is planning lessons for her Grade 7 class.