

THE ROYAL MANITOBA THEATRE CENTRE
AND PLAYNOW.COM PRESENT



ASSASSINATING THOMSON

Created and Performed by Bruce Horak

Originally Directed by Ryan Gladstone

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Assassinating Thomson

Enrichment Guide

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The Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre is proud to call Manitoba home. Royal MTC is located in Winnipeg on Treaty 1 territory, the lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples, and the National Homeland of the Red River Métis. We are thankful for the benefits sharing this land has afforded us, acknowledge the responsibilities of the Treaties, and embrace the opportunity to partner with Indigenous communities in the spirit of reconciliation and collaboration.

Playwright Biography



Assassinating Thomson was written and is performed by Bruce Horak. He is characterized by Rebecca Northan and Carmen Grant as “an incredible Canadian artist... actor... writer... musician... composer...” and “interested in finding out who he is and who he can be and realizing his potential” (Tangled Arts Talk). What makes these titles even more incredible is that Horak is also legally blind – a term he prefers to visually impaired – having only 9% of his vision. He sees through what he describes as a “fractured lens, a tired eye” (Tangled Arts Talk). While acknowledging this as a limitation, he celebrates the fact that “it also opens up opportunity to add some abstractions that [he’s] clearly seeing but perhaps aren’t available to the fully sighted” (Tangled Arts Talk).

He was diagnosed with Bilateral Retinoblastoma, cancer of the eyes, at the age of 18 months after his parents had noticed something wrong with his eye. His right eye was removed completely but in his left eye there were just three small tumors, so his father insisted the doctors find a way to preserve some of his eyesight. Horak says he’s “not really Blind enough to be Blind” and “not sighted enough to be sighted (*Assassinating Thomson*, 12). However, he “learned how to look like a fully-sighted person” and people he had known for years didn’t know he was legally blind. This ability to “fake it” led to a career in theatre arts (*Assassinating Thomson*, 13-14). At the same time, though, Bruce has declared that a career in the arts seemed “predetermined” as his father was a cartoonist and high school English and drama teacher, and his mother a writer, painter, and singer. He is the youngest of four boys and all are artistically inclined (Tangled Arts Talk).

Horak’s practice of theatre, performance, music, and painting all influence each other, and we see that in *Assassinating Thomson* as Horak paints a portrait of the audience during the play. In fact, art led him to discovering the subject for this piece, as it was his Grade 11 art teacher that introduced him to the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson; she had a print of Thomson’s “The Jack Pine” up in the art room and would tell the story of his death. People would often ask Horak how he sees, so in 2011 he began painting portraits, in what he has titled “The Way I See It” series, to show them. He painted one a day for a year, and has now completed over 600 as he makes his way to #1000.

Assassinating Thomson is not the only play Horak has written. He writes and produces a lot of his work including, in conjunction with Co-Creator Rebecca Northan, the critically acclaimed and award-winning *This is Cancer*. Like *Assassinating Thomson*, *This is Cancer* is a one-man show inspired by his life. In it, Bruce is “the living embodiment of the disease which took [his] father and took 91% of [his] eyesight” (Tangled Art Talks). Horak explains it’s about “pointing that flashlight on the disease and taking some of the darkness away from that, and fear from it”

(Globe and Mail). What all Horak's work has in common is a unique and refreshing perspective.

Most recently, Horak played Lieutenant Hemmer in *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*, making him the first legally blind actor in the franchise. Hemmer was a male Aenar and, like all other Aenar, was blind but with strong telepathic abilities. Like Horak, he does not allow his vision loss to prevent him from doing his job. Calgary-born and currently based in Stratford, Ontario, Horak has acted in shows across Canada and is going to "continue to find ways to make [his] way in the world as a creative" (Childhood Eye Cancer Trust).

Related Resource Links: You can find out more about Bruce at his website, brucehorak.com. [Watch a recording of his talk](#) with Tangled Art + Disability at the Art Gallery of Ontario (13 minutes). You can read about his journey to and character in *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* in this [CBC article](#). Bruce speaks about his painting style and "The Way I see It" series in this [interview about his art](#) with heavy.com (may be of particular interest to visual art classes and groups!)

Content Overview

This section may contain spoilers.

No strong language or sexual content. The central idea of the play is an unsolved death, with a description of the corpse early in the show and mention of potential violent events. As the play is presented as a casual conversation, these events are only spoken about, never shown.

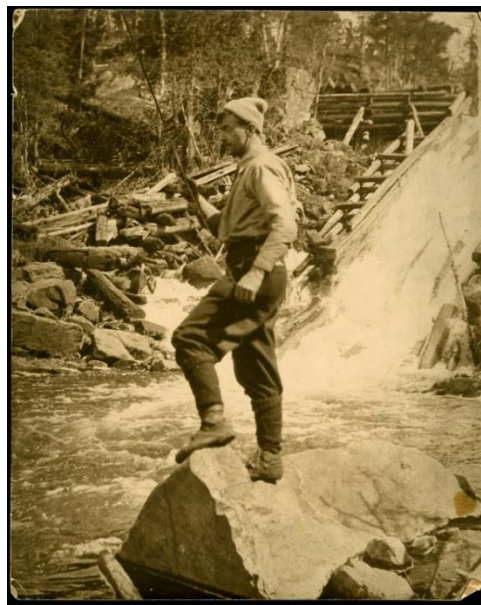
Plot Summary

Assassinating Thomson is a one-man show written and performed by Canadian artist Bruce Horak. At the play's onset, a canvas drop cloth covers the stage, and the drop cloth itself is covered with quotes and images. These are intended to prompt the performer just in case he becomes consumed with painting. Yes, painting. With a ticket to this show you become not only an audience member but a subject in a portrait. Throughout the play, Horak paints a portrait of the entire audience. He acknowledges that being looked at often makes people nervous, so he distracts his subjects by telling them a story: the disappearance and death of 39-year-old landscape artist Tom Thomson on Canoe Lake, Ontario in 1917. At the time it was concluded that the cause of death was accidental drowning; however, Horak asks questions and produces several theories as to how it could have instead been...murder. The single conclusion he draws is that the case can only lead to speculation. However, he reminds us that it is through the telling and re-telling of the story that the artist lives on. Horak ends up telling two stories - Thomson's, and his own - and the two have more similarities than you might suspect. That's the verb "suspect", not the noun "suspect" ...though there are many suspects (the noun) in the play! Those similarities include: a shared birthday (August 5th); being busted in church for drawing in the hymnal; playing the mandolin; a love of camping, hiking, and fishing; moving to Toronto at the age of 26 and living at Yonge and Wellesley specifically; and finally, one of the aforementioned subjects was a man named Shannon Fraser while Bruce's

high school girlfriend happened to also be named Shannon Fraser. These similarities - or shared edges as Bruce refers to them - weave together the two men's stories. While Thomson and Horak share edges, Horak has a unique perspective. He is legally blind- a term he prefers to visually impaired- with only 9% of his vision. Thus, not only are there two stories but two mysteries: the mystery of the death of Tom Thomson, and the mystery of what the portrait will look like. Bruce does reveal the portrait to the audience at the end of the play— so one of the mysteries is solved by the time it is finished!



Canoe Lake by Tom Thomson. C. 1915. Oil on wood. Art Gallery of Ontario.



Tom Thomson portrait and standing on a rock fishing in moving water. Library and Archives Canada / C-17399 and 4203786 <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/tom-thomson>

Context and Related Resources

In the play, Bruce Horak recalls, “When I was 34 years old, I picked up two things which began to define me- one was a paintbrush, and the other was a white cane” (10). These two things are symbolic of the two topics on which some context is beneficial prior to viewing the play: Tom Thomson and The Group of Seven, and Visual Impairment.

Visual Impairment

Bruce’s primary strategy to ease his audience as he paints their portrait is to distract them with a murder mystery. However, he also reassures them not to be too concerned about having their likeness captured on canvas because he is legally blind. He says the politically correct term is “Vision Impaired” but he prefers “legally blind” because it “trips off the tongue, and that’s what it says on [his] driver’s licence” (10). Approximately 1.5 million Canadians identify as having sight loss. In Canada, the term visual impairment is used to describe any issues with vision, from variations of partial sightedness to blindness. A person is considered legally blind when their visual acuity is 20/200 or less in both eyes after correction and/or they have a visual field of 20 degrees or narrower. This means that they would need to stand 20 feet from an object to see it as clearly as someone with perfect vision could from 200 feet away. The national standard for non-commercial drivers to obtain a licence is visual acuity of not less than 20/50 when both eyes are open and examined together. It is important to note that terminology can vary between countries and, ultimately, we should refer to people with the language they prefer.

Related Resource Links: CNIB has put together a guide to [etiquette when connecting with those who are blind](#). Learn more about vision impairment and blindness in articles from [Kids Health](#) or the [World Health Organisation](#). The [Ontario Association of Optometrists](#) also wrote about celebrating Bruce and his career.

The Group of Seven

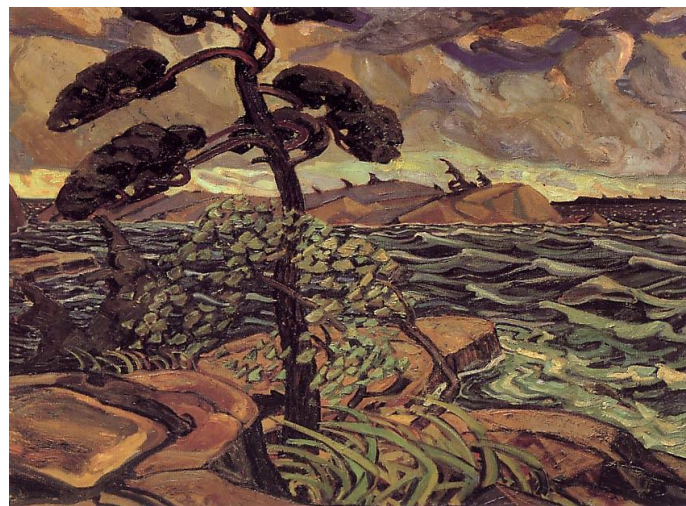
Bruce explains the Group of Seven as “Canada’s first ‘official’ art movement” formed by men who followed in Thomson’s footsteps after his death (8). The Group of Seven, also known as the Algonquin School, was a group of Canadian landscape painters founded in 1920. Its original members were Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, and J.E.H. MacDonald. However, the Group of Seven ironically ended up consisting of ten members. Those three additional members were A.J. Casson, L.L. FitzGerald, and Edwin Holgate. Tom Thomson and Emily Carr were associated with the group as well but not official members. It is also ironic that Thomson is the most famous painter associated with the group yet not technically a member. Harris wrote in an essay that Thomson was “a part of the movement before we pinned a label on it” ([thegroupofseven.ca](#)). The members shared the belief that Canadian art could be created through direct contact with nature. They drew inspiration from post-impressionists, including Vincent Van Gogh, and the observation that Scandinavians “begin with nature rather than with the art” (Art Story). This meant the artist’s feelings towards their environment should dictate the style of the painting, and therefore the group members were united more by their common belief than one distinct

technique. As the group's work gained popularity in the early 1930s, many Canadian artists felt the National Gallery of Canada favoured the Group of Seven; this controversy led to the disbanding of the Group of Seven and the formation of the Canadian Group of Painters which had two aims: "to foster closer cooperation between Canadian artists and to encourage and cultivate Canadian artistic expression" (Mayberry). Lawren Harris' "Mountain Forms" currently holds the title for most valuable Canadian work of art sold at Heffel auction house which went for 11.21 million Canadian dollars. It is Horak's belief that the stories behind these artists, such as those told in *Assassinating Thomson*, add value to their art.

Related Resource Links: Explore the sources for this section! "[The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson](#)" website has detailed articles on each member and associate including examples of their work at thegroupofseven.ca. You can find an overview, works, and other resources at [The Art Story](#) or see more from the Canadian Group of Painters at [Mayberry Fine Art's website](#).



Members of the Group of Seven at the Arts & Letters Club in Toronto, clockwise from the left: A.Y. Jackson, Fred Varley, Lawren Harris, Barker Fairley, Franz Johnston, Arthur Lismer and J.E.H. Macdonald. (courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario) <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/group-of-seven>



The group held on to their varied artistic styles. For example, Varley and Lismer painted the same storm but came up with different results. (left: *Stormy Weather, Georgian Bay* by Varley; right: *A September Gale Georgian Bay* by Lismer.)

Glossary

Automatists- Horak says the Automatists were a group of French-Canadian artists who created “automatic art” (19). In art, automatism is a technique for producing art without conscious thought. Les Automatistes was a group of artists from Quebec in the 1940s who were part of a movement founded by Paul-Émile Borduas who was influenced by automatism.

AY Jackson- A.Y. Jackson, CC, CMG, was a Canadian painter and founding member of the Group of Seven. Horak said, that upon returning from a sketching trip in Northern Canada, Jackson reported that the RCMP and Hudson’s Bay Company were responsible for an influenza outbreak affecting the First Nations people (19).

Bay and Bloor- Bay and Bloor is an intersection in Toronto, Ontario. It’s at that corner that his friend Naomi “comes up to [him], sees [his] cane- grabs his arm and yells, ‘Bruce! It’s Naomi! How are you?’ (16).

Bugs Bunny- When explaining “The Perception of Negative Space,” Bruce asks the audience to “[o]bserve the shape – around the hand- the impression it leaves” and compares that to when Bugs Bunny “runs through a wall and leaves the outline” (17). Bugs Bunny is a cartoon rabbit famous for his catchphrase, “What’s up, Doc?” created by Warner Brothers and is one of the world’s most popular animated characters.

Bifocals- The surgery that was required due to his cataract resulted in Bruce having to wear bifocals most of his life. Bifocals are eyeglasses with lenses that are divided into two segments; on the

top is the distance vision prescription and on the bottom is the near vision prescription.

Bilateral Retinoblastoma- Bruce states that Bilateral Retinoblastoma is “cancer of the eyes” (10). Bruce was diagnosed with this at the age of 18 months. As a result, his right eye was removed and replaced with an artificial eye.

Retinoblastoma is the most common type of eye cancer in children and is typically found in children below the age of two. Bilateral Retinoblastoma is when both eyes are affected.

Cataract- A cloudy area in the lens of the eye that restricts light from reaching the retina and consequently interferes with vision. Bruce developed a cataract when he was 4.

Coke-bottle Glasses- Horak says, “When I got a contact lens in Grade 11, I got rid of my coke-bottle glasses and disappeared even more” (12). Coke-bottle glasses is a slang term for eyeglasses with thick lenses due to a strong prescription. The term derived from similarities to classic reusable coke bottles made from a thick glass to reduce the risk of breakage.

Doctor James MacCallum- Horak identified Doctor James MacCallum as a “pal” of Lawren Harris, and together they “offer to pay Thomson’s expenses for a year and give him a studio and a place to live in Toronto if he would devote himself to the work” (9). Dr. James M. MacCallum was a reputable oculist and ophthalmologist who was a friend and patron of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven.

Don Draper- Bruce says, “Thomson doesn’t have a glamorous Don Draper kinda job” (8). Don Draper is the fictional main character of the television series *Mad Men*. He is a founding partner and Creative Director at an advertising agency in 1960s Manhattan, NY.

Dutch Pastoral School- Bruce says that prior to the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson, Canadian Art was influenced by the Dutch pastoral school and claims it was “pretty...and false” (17). The Dutch Golden Age was a period during the 17th century, after the Netherlands gained independence from Spain in 1482, in which the prospering economy and rising nationalism in the Dutch Republic resulted in an increase in demand for art. Landscape painting flourished as a specialized genre and emphasized distinct characteristics of Dutch landscapes features while elevating Dutch ideals.

Emily Carr- Horak discusses Emily Carr after announcing he took a course in “the scandals of Canadian Art,” describing her as a west-coast artist and often deified as a saint but who led a difficult life (19). Emily Carr was a Canadian artist linked to the Group of Seven and inspired by the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast. She was one of the first artists of national notoriety to come from the West Coast and was one of the only female artists of that period in North America or Europe.

Frogger- Bruce says he used to attempt to avoid people and objects and likened this to playing Frogger (15). Frogger is a classic arcade game with the objective of helping your character, the frog, to cross from the bottom of the screen to the top by avoiding obstacles.

Glenbow Museum- An art and culture museum in Calgary, Alberta. Bruce was commissioned by the Glenbow Museum to write “a complete history of Canadian Art” (18).

Group of Seven- Bruce defines the Group of Seven as “Canada’s first ‘official’ art movement” formed by men who followed in Thomson’s footsteps after his death (8). The Group of Seven, also known as the Algonquin School, was a group of Canadian landscape painters founded in 1920 and disbanded in 1933. Its original members were Franklin Carmichael, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Frank Johnston, Arthur Lismer, and J.E.H. MacDonald. Additional members were A.J. Casson, L.L. FitzGerland, and Edwin Holgate. Tom Thomson and Emily Carr were also associated with the group but not official members.

Hubble Telescope- Bruce says, “It’s difficult to fake being fully sighted when you’re wearing the Hubble Telescope on your face” (11). The Hubble Space Telescope, named after Edwin Hubble, who studied distant galaxies, was launched into Earth’s orbit in 1990 and remains in operation to this day. It is 43.5 feet long and 14 feet wide.

Hymnal- A book of religious songs (hymns) used in a religious service. A similarity between Bruce and Tom Thomson is that they were both “busted in church for drawing in the hymnal” (7).

Jackson Pollock- Pollock is an American painter famous for his radical method of dripping paint onto an outstretched canvas to produce what became known as “drip paintings”.

Jean-Paul Riopelle- Horak discusses Jean-Paul Riopelle when listing “the

scandals of Canadian Art,” identifying him as member of a group of French-Canadian artists called the Automatists. Horak mentions it is said that Jean-Paul Riopelle “was deported from the States for attempting to punch out Jackson Pollock who he accused of stealing his ideas” (19). Jean-Paul Riopelle is well known for signing the Automatistes’ manifesto *Le Refus Global* and his “mosaic” technique that involved applying paint to canvas using a trowel.

Lawren Stewart Harris- Lawren Harris, CC, was a Canadian landscape painter and leading member of the Group of Seven. Bruce describes Harris as a “very wealthy socialite” and explains that he is “heir to a fortune, but has other aspirations” to “start an art movement in Canada” (9).

Left-brain- Bruce says “We live in a verbal, critical, ‘left-brain’ kinda world” (5). The brain is divided into two hemispheres and while they do not function independently, they do function differently. The left brain is more verbal, analytical, and orderly.

Legally Blind- Horak prefers the term “legally blind” to “visually impaired” because it “trips off the tongue, and that’s what it says on [his] driver’s licence” (10). A person is considered to be legally blind when their visual acuity is 20/200 or less in both eyes after correction and/or they have a visual field of 20 degrees or narrower.

Leprosy- Horak says Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King once famously remarked that looking at a Group of Seven painting made him think that those artists must be suffering from Leprosy (18). Leprosy is a chronic infection disease caused by the bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae* which

affects the skin, mucous membranes, eyes, and peripheral nerves.

Prime Minister Robert Borden- Horak says “Prime Minister Robert Borden was trying to increase immigration and was afraid that to represent the feeling of this country would have people fleeing” (18). Sir Robert Borden was prime minister of Canada from 1911-1920 and was therefore in office during the First World War.

Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King- Horak says Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King “once famously remarked that looking at a Group of Seven painting made him think that those artists must be suffering from Leprosy” (18). William Lyon Mackenzie King was Prime Minister of Canada from 1921-26, 1926-30, and 1935-48, making him Canada’s long-serving prime minister. He is most known for his leadership during the Great Depression and Second World War.

Radiation- As an infant, Horak was flown to Toronto and treated with radiation to save some of his eyesight. Radiation therapy is a form of cancer treatment that uses high doses of radiation to destroy cancer cells and damage a cell’s DNA to prevent it from dividing. Radiation can shrink a tumor or eradicate it entirely.

Red Sea- Horak describes how, when he uses his cane, people jump out of the way- and occasionally right into traffic. He compares this to the parting of the Red Sea (15). This is an allusion to the Bible, specifically Exodus 14: 19-31, in which Moses was leading the Israelites out of Egypt on their way to the Promised Land and when they reached

the Red Sea Moses stretched out his hand and the waters parted.

Right Mode- Bruce says, “In order to draw or paint, an artist has to access the other mode- the visual or Right Mode” (5). The brain is divided into two hemispheres and while they do not function independently, they do function differently. The right brain is more visual and intuitive.

Spectre- Bruce explains that there is a ring of colour around everything he sees and likens it to an aura or spectre. A spectre is a “visible disembodied spirit; ghost” (Mirriam-Webster).

The Jack Pine- Bruce’s art teacher had a print of “The Jack Pine” in the art room which would inspire her to tell her class the story of Thomson’s disappearance. “The Jack Pine” is an oil painting by Tom Thomson dated 1916-1917. The piece features a lone Jack Pine, which is the most widely distributed tree in Canada. It is regarded as emblematic of Canada’s landscape and is one of the country’s most famous and reproduced images.

Vision Impaired- The term “visual impairment” is used in Canada to describe any issues with vision, from variations of partial sightedness to blindness.

White cane- Bruce Horak says, “When I was 34 years old, I picked up two things which began to define me- one was a paintbrush, and the other was a white cane” (10). A white cane is an aid for people living with sight loss that helps them navigate their surroundings and

signals to others the user’s visual impairment.

Winnie Trainor- Horak says that “[i]n every book on Tom Thomson you will find a photograph of a woman...standing in the woods in an ankle-length dress- holding a fishing rod in one hand and some fish in the other” and in many it is captioned as Winnie Trainor (24). It is believed she was either the girlfriend or fiancé of Tom Thomson, and rumoured that she may have been pregnant at the time of his death.

World War One- Horak says Thomson was accused by Martin Blecher Jr of being a coward since he was not overseas fighting in WWI. Thomson tells Blecher he attempted to enlist three times but was turned down on account of flat feet. World War One, also referred to as the First World War and the Great War, began in 1914 and lasted until 1918. Most nations who declared war were on the side of the Allied Powers, including Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Romania, Canada, Japan, and the United States and were opposed by the Central Powers formed by Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire. The war claimed the lives of 16 million people and left innumerable others physically and psychologically wounded. During WWI, having flat feet would disqualify one from conscription.

Yonge and Wellesley- Bruce and Tom Thompson both moved to Toronto at the age of 26 and both lived near Yonge and Wellesley (7). Yonge and Wellesley is an intersection in Toronto, Ontario.

Discussion and Writing Prompts

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

1. What does the title of the play suggest to you about Horak's opinion on Tom Thomson's death?
2. What surprised you about the play?
3. Did any part of the play make you feel uncomfortable?
4. Would you feel comfortable performing a one-person-show?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a one-person show?
6. The script specifies that if there is an ASL interpreter they are seated Stage Right as well as when they will be introduced. Not all scripts include these directions. Why do you think Bruce Horak incorporated them into the script?
7. Do you think this play would be easy to produce? Why or why not?
8. Explain the use of props and costume in the show.
9. What is the significance of the watch as a prop/costume piece in the play?
10. Discuss the role of painting in the play.
11. Do you have a favourite artist? If so, who?
12. What do you think is the intended message of the show? What did you take away from the show?
13. Bruce Horak first learned about Tom Thomson from his Grade 11 art teacher. What is something you have learned about in school that you would like to learn more about? *This could be the basis for a research project, or you could have the students write a script based on a historical event*
14. What makes the story of Tom Thomson worth telling?
15. Have you ever had your portrait painted?
16. Have you ever been allowed to use a cheat sheet during a test or exam? In what ways is the drop cloth like a cheat sheet?
17. What did you learn from the play about visual impairment and how you can support people living with vision loss?
18. How can theatre help develop empathy?
19. Did the play help you gain an understanding of the experiences of people living with visual impairment?
20. How is Horak's perspective influenced by his visual impairment?
21. In what ways is painting like investigating a murder?
22. Conduct research on three of the new terms you heard in this play.
23. In the play, Horak says, "It's amazing how much more you can pick up when your hands are empty" (22). What are the literal and metaphorical meanings of this statement?
24. How did Horak's life influence his writing of *Assassinating Thomson*?
25. A [summary of the play on Bruce's website](#) states, "Art, politics, greed, ambition, love, and murder are intertwined in a one-man tour-de-force." Discuss one of these themes.

26. In the play, Horak says, “I discovered what a lot of artists already knew: the stories added value to the art” (20). Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
27. How historically accurate is the play?
28. Horak says “Smell is the closest link to memory” (28). What smells do you associate with memories?
29. Why did the playwright end the show with “It’s finished”?
30. What do you think happened to Tom Thomson?

Suggested Classroom Activities

Virtual Visit

Go on a virtual visit to an exhibit on The Group of Seven and/or Tom Thomson. You can access them here:

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/meet-canada-39-s-group-of-7/3QWBsItSVCCfAQ?hl=en>

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/vQVBU5TLinzWmg?hl=en>

Myths vs. Facts

There are many misconceptions surrounding blindness. This [list of myths and facts](#) put together by the CNIB Foundation can serve as an anticipation guide.

Prior to seeing the play, present your students with a list of statements about blindness. You can choose to initially present them only with myths, or with some myths and some facts. Ask them to read each one and decide if it’s in a myth or fact and then lead a discussion in which you reveal the correct information.

Activating Prior Knowledge

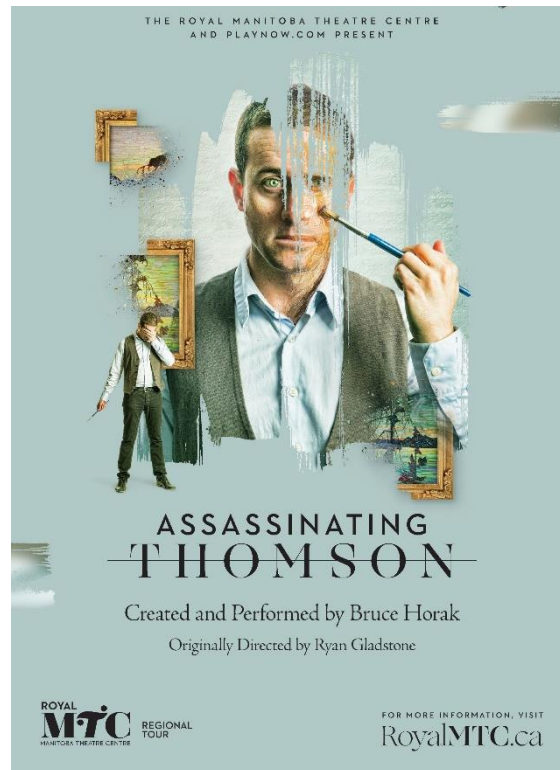
Prior to seeing the play, show your students a picture of Tom Thomson’s “Jack Pine” and ask if anyone recognizes and/or can identify the painting. Then share with them that the artist of the painting is the subject of the play.



The Jack Pine, 1916–17, by Tom Thomson, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_of_Seven_\(artists\)#/media/File:The_Jack_Pine,_by_Tom_Thomson.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_of_Seven_(artists)#/media/File:The_Jack_Pine,_by_Tom_Thomson.jpg)

Poster of a Painting for a Play

Prior to seeing the play, show your students a picture of the poster and ask them to make inferences as to what the play could be about.



Ice Breaker

Bruce has discovered that he shares a lot of “edges” with the painter Tom Thomson. Encourage your students to discover the edges they are with each other. You can leave this open-ended and ask students to circulate and converse with each other and record as many things they have in common as they can, or you can give the activity more structure by providing them with a student bingo cards to fill out. You may already have student bingo cards among your resources, or you can create your own using a bingo card generator such as <https://bingobaker.com/>. Customize it with potential shared edges such as “Same birthday” and “Same favourite colour” etc.

Tricks

Throughout the play, Horak shares several activities to activate the right or visual mode of the brain. They are provided in his words here so that you can facilitate them with your students.

1. **Edges:** Observe the edges of my hand...now, if I put this hand up against my other (hands together) and you draw just the edge- the question becomes: are you drawing the right hand- the left hand- both? Neither? (6)
2. **The Perception of Negative Space:** Look at my hand (holding hand up)- now your left mode will pop in and say, “yes- that’s a hand- there’s four fingers and a thumb”- but if you look at the space between the thumb and the finger- not the

fingers themselves- your verbal mode does not have a word for that space. Observe the shape- around the hand- the impression it leaves. Like when bugs bunny runs through a wall and leaves the outline. Your brain flips the image, so you see the space and not the hand. The negative space. If you draw that- inadvertently, you draw the hand. Careful observation of Negative space slows the dominant left mode down, the right mode picks up and time will evaporate... (16-17)

3. **The Perception of Relationship:** An artist will imagine a grid over what they see- and then place that same grid over a blank canvass. Break it down into manageable chunks. It's simply a matter of filling in the blanks- to get things to relate to each other on the canvas. It certainly helps with perspective...(22)
4. **Perception of Light and Shadow:** A fourth trick to get the right mode of the brain active is the perception of light and shadow. If you have a look at your own hand, you'll see within it shadows and highlights. Within each shadow there exists a multitude of tones. Within each highlight, a multitude of tones. It can be difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. Careful observation of shadows and highlights slows the left mode down, the right mode picks up, and time evaporates (28)

Humour Has It

Bruce incorporates a lot of humour into the play. Choose one of the following examples and discuss what it accomplishes. Think about: How does he relate to his audience through humour? What is he able to teach his audience through humour?

- a) "Murder? Yeah...Now we're talking" (5).
- b) "I've often wondered: if procrastination is so bad- why does it begin with a "pro" (5)
- c) "It's very difficult to talk and paint at the same time. It requires using two conflicting parts of the brain simultaneously- and can lead a person to repeat themselves...get lost...or repeat themselves." (6)
- d) "As I'm also attempting to paint a portrait while I tell this story, I can get a bit lost- so, in order to keep me on track, I've developed this "trigger map" here on the floor...Little bits and pieces of the story to help me find my way. So...where was I?" (6).
- e) The politically correct term is "Vision Impaired"- and I have to be politically correct because I don't want to offend myself" (10).
- f) Bruce says, "It's difficult to fake being fully sighted when you're wearing the hubble telescope on your face" (11).
- g) "...my agent calls and offers me an audition for a part in a movie called, "Blindness"- in which there's an epidemic and the world goes blind. My agent says, "Bruce- you'd be perfect for this. Only thing is- you don't look blind" (14).
- h) "The part of the Blind Man in the movie, "Blindness" went to a fully sighted actor. Not that I'm complaining...after all- I've been stealing roles from fully sighted people my whole life...it's only fair" (16).
- i) "The Group of Seven...was referred to as "the hot mush school" ...Hey, if you're living out in the woods for long enough, a nice bowl of hot mush would be pretty tasty" (18).

- j) “So- I dug into the research phase of the project. It’s something I usually really enjoy but it was tough going at first. Most of the books they gave me were a great cure for insomnia” (19).
- k) “Keep telling the story. If you don’t know the story- for God’s sake, just make it up. I did” (39).

Simple Instructions with Similes

During Mobility Training, Bruce is instructed, “You unfold the cane- hold it like a golf club- swing it like a radar. Keep your head up and your shoulders back” (15). “Hold it like a golf club” and “swing it like a radar” are examples of **similes**, which make comparisons between two unlike things, often introduced by “like” or “as.” First, facilitate a discussion on why similes are helpful when teaching someone about or how to do something new. Then, task students with choosing something they are good at/ enjoy doing and write out instructions that include 3-5 similes.

Perspective: A Reflection

One of the themes in the play is perspective. Task your students with discussing one or both quotes from the show in a reflection on perspective. What does the quote say about Bruce Horak’s perspective on the situation being discussed and/or his perspective on life? Does it align with your own perspective? Has it influenced your perspective?

- a) “At the age of 18 months, I was diagnosed with Bilateral Retinoblastoma- cancer of the eyes. It was so bad in my right eye that they had to remove it completely. This eye is artificial. I get to carry a little work of art around in my head wherever I go” (10).
- b) “Perhaps we can get to a point where we no longer grieve what is lost but celebrate what remains” (27).

Canadian Identity

During the play, Horak discusses Canadian identity. [This lesson produced by the Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators](#) will prompt your students to consider what defines the Canadian identity, and how that identity is conveyed through Canadian theatre and art.

Autobiography

After hearing Bruce Horak’s autobiography through the play, ask students to write their own autobiography. Begin by giving them a template (you could use the outline of a body or face) to write or draw any words or images that they identify with or are important to them. This will serve as their “trigger map” as they write their autobiography. You can use this assignment to assess a wide variety of writing skills, depending on your current writing focus. Alternatively, you can ask them to write and perform an autobiographical monologue.

Worth a Thousand Words Assignment

We've all heard the saying "a picture is worth a thousand words." Horak echoes that sentiment by showing people (including his audience) how he sees through his painting. The Worth a Thousand Words Assignment is a research project that will reinforce the power of images. You can assign students a topic related to the play or allow students to select a topic of their choice.

Assignment description: Through your photo essay, you are going to "tell a story" about a topic. You are going to select 10 images from the Internet, magazines, or other sources and display them in a Google Slides presentation. Give each image a caption that states one fact about the topic. You must include a list of sources where you found your information. Use at least three different sources. Think about what thoughts, feelings, and conversations you want people to have, decide what pictures will create those thoughts, feelings, and conversations, and then write captions that will include descriptions, context, and explanations that will support your message.

*If you are a Visual Arts teacher, you may want to adapt this assignment so that your students create the images themselves and display the photo essay in a manner other than Google slides such as a gallery walk.

One Portrait Two Ways

Task your students with creating a portrait, and then producing the same portrait but in the style of a famous artist.

Horak as Hemmer

Bruce Horak played Lieutenant Hemmer in the first season of Star Trek: Strange New Worlds. If you have access to episodes of Star Trek through your subscription service(s), consider playing an episode for your class. Otherwise, you can show them some clips from YouTube such as these:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ByxU-PzEs4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dVOQE53aaw>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewWTt_czorU

Next, ask your student to read "[Bruce Horak's Hemmer Is More Than a Simple Engineer on Star Trek: Strange New World](#)," an interview with Emma Stefansky at Thrillist in which Horak discusses his role as Hemmer.

Then, ask your students to respond to the following questions in either a class discussion or written response: What connection did Horak have to Star Trek prior to being cast? In what ways does Horak relate to Hemmer? How is watching a television program different than watching a live theatre performance? What similarities and differences did you observe between Horak as Hemmer and Horak as himself? What does Horak appreciate about the science fiction genre?

Representation Matters

On October 20, 2022, Horak Tweeted a fan letter he received. It is reproduced below, and you can read the six Tweets containing the letter here

<https://twitter.com/brucehorak>. Then facilitate a conversation, or have students write a journal entry or complete a project on why representation matters.

“I want to share a fan letter I received:

‘I am an astronomy student....I was also born legally blind. When I was eight years old, I started watching Star Trek: The Next Generation with my parents, and I quickly became a *very* enthusiastic Trekkie. In Star Trek, I saw a hope for a better future—a future where a little blind girl could explore space, something I had never seen before in our world. I always cite Star Trek as one of my main inspirations for studying astronomy. Sometimes it still amazes me that that little girl has grown into a student who spends her time looking for the oldest stars in the galaxy. I loved Strange New Worlds; in fact, “love” is probably an insufficient word to describe how incredible the show was. In it, I found that same hopeful optimism and also an amazing amount of fun. Amidst everything I loved on the show, I was beyond excited to see Hemmer among the senior officers. To see an actual blind person play a character on the show that inspired me to study astronomy is more special to me than I think I can put into words.’

To Sarah and all the fans: my sincere thanks. To the creatives at [#snw](#): please keep it up. Representation matters.”

Curriculum Connections

Attending *Assassinating Thomson* and discussing it, or participating in some of the suggested or similar activities, will fit into the Manitoba curricula in Drama, English Language Arts, and Visual Arts.

Drama

Senior Years

(DR-R1) The learner generates initial reactions to drama/theatre experiences.

(DR-R2) The learner critically observes and describes drama/theatre experiences

(DR-R3) 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.

(DR-C1) The learner develops understandings about people and practices in the dramatic arts.

(DR-C2) The learner develops understandings about the influence and impact of the dramatic arts

(DR-C3) The learner develops understandings about the roles, purposes, and meanings of the dramatic arts.

English Language Arts

Express Ideas (1.1.1) Question and reflect on personal responses, predictions, and interpretations; apply personal viewpoints to diverse situations or circumstances.

Consider Others' Ideas (1.1.2) Acknowledge the value of others' ideas and opinions in exploring and extending personal interpretations and viewpoints.

Explain Opinions (1.2.2) Review and refine personal viewpoints through reflection, feedback, and self-assessment.

Prior Knowledge (2.1.1) Analyze and explain connections between previous experiences, prior knowledge, and a variety of texts [including books].

Experience Various Texts (2.2.1) Experience texts from a variety of forms and genres and cultural traditions; explain various interpretations of the same text.

Connects Self, Texts, and Culture (2.2.2) - Examine how personal experiences, community traditions, and Canadian perspectives are presented in oral, literary, and media texts.

Forms and Genres (2.3.1) Explain preferences for particular forms and genres of oral, literary, and media texts.

Appreciate the Artistry of Texts (2.2.3) Discuss how word choice and supporting details in oral, literary, and media texts [including books, drama, and oral presentations] affect purpose and audience.

Participate in Group Inquiry (3.1.3) Generate and access ideas in a group and use a variety of methods to focus and clarify inquiry or research topic

Organize Information (3.3.1) Organize information and ideas by developing and selecting appropriate categories and organizational structures. Organize Ideas (4.1.3) Identify and use a variety of organizational patterns in own oral, written, and visual texts; use effective transitions.

Revise Content (4.2.2) Review previous draft and revise to refine communication and enhance self-expression.

Grammar and Usage (4.3.1) Edit for parallel structure, use of transitional devices, and clarity.

Spelling (4.3.2) Know and apply a repertoire of spelling conventions when editing and proofreading; use a variety of resources when editing and proofreading.

Capitalization and Punctuation (4.3.3) Know and apply capitalization and punctuation conventions in dialogues, quotations, footnotes, endnotes, and references when editing and proofreading.

Attentive Listening and Viewing (4.4.3) Demonstrate critical listening and viewing skills and strategies and show respect for presenter(s).

Compare Responses (5.2.1) Recognize that differing perspectives and unique reactions enrich understanding.

Relate Texts to Culture (5.2.2) Explain ways in which oral, literary, and media texts reflect topics and themes in life.

Appreciate Diversity (5.2.3) 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.

Visual Arts

(VA-M1) The learner develops competencies for using elements and principles of artistic design in a variety of contexts.

(VA-CR1) The learner generates and uses ideas from a variety of sources for creating visual art.

(VA-C1) The learner develops understandings about people and practices in the visual arts.

(VA-C2) The learner develops understandings about the influence and impact of the visual arts.

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Enrichment Guide Creator Biography

Sarah Farrant is thrilled to be maintaining a long-distance relationship as a study guide creator with the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre from Hamilton, 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. Sarah recently saw *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* in Toronto and loved seeing the characters from her favourite book series come to life on stage.