

ENRICHMENT GUIDE

# BURNING MOM

Written by  
Mieko Ouchi



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MANITOBA THEATRE CENTRE

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# Burning Mom

## Enrichment Guide

Created & Compiled by Tala Gammon  
Edited by Ksenia Broda-Milian for Royal MTC

### Table of Contents

The Role of the Audience.....	3
Playwright Biography.....	4
Characters.....	5
Content Overview.....	5
Plot Summary.....	5
Synopsis.....	5
Context and Related Resources .....	5
Glossary .....	9
Questions to Consider.....	10
Mental Health, Grief, and Bereavement Resources .....	11
Enrichment Guide Contributor Biography.....	11

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.



## The Role of the Audience

Theatre needs its audience! We are happy to have you here. Every staff person, actor, and crew member backstage plays an important part in your experience, and you also have a role in the experience of cast, crew and the people around you.

**Arrive Early:** Please make sure you give yourself enough time to find your seat before the performance starts. Latecomers may not be admitted to a performance. We ask schools and other groups to arrive at least 20-30 minutes before the show.

**Cell Phones and Other Electronic Devices:** Please **turn off** your cell phone/mp3 player /gaming system/camera/smart watch. Texting, surfing, and gaming during performances is very distracting for the performers and other audience members. Using cameras and recording devices during a performance is **never** allowed.

**Talking During the Performance:** Even when you whisper, you can be heard by performers and people around you. Unless it is a relaxed performance, disruptive patrons will be removed from the theatre. Please wait until after the performance to share your words with others.

**Food/Drinks:** Food and outside drinks are not allowed in the theatre. When there is an intermission, snacks and drinks may be available for purchase. There is complimentary water in the lobby.

**Dress:** There is no dress code at the Royal MTC, but we respectfully ask you not to wear hats in the theatre. We strive to be a scent-free environment and thank all patrons for their cooperation.

**Leaving During the Performance:** If you leave the theatre during a performance, you will be readmitted at the discretion of Front of House staff. If readmitted, you may be placed in an empty seat at the back of the auditorium instead of your original seat.

**Being Asked to Leave:** The theatre staff has, and will exercise, the right to ask any member of the audience to leave if that person is being inappropriate or disruptive including (but not limited to): talking, using devices that produce light or sound, and deliberately interfering with an actor or the performance (tripping, throwing items on or near the stage, etc.).

**Talkbacks:** A short question and answer period with the actors takes place after student matinees, first Tuesday evening shows, and some public matinees. While watching the show, make a mental note of questions to ask the actors about the production or life in the theatre. Our artists deserve to be treated with respect! It's okay to have a negative opinion, but this is your chance to ask questions and understand the performance or process, not to criticize. If you have a concern, see the house manager after the show and they will make sure your feedback gets to the appropriate Royal MTC staff.

**Enjoy the show:** Laugh, cry, gasp – responding to the performance is part of the nature of theatre! As you get involved in the story, try to balance your reactions with respecting the people around you. The curtain call is part of the performance too – it gives you a chance to thank all the artists for their hard work with applause, and for them to thank you for your attention. We all appreciate when you stay at your seat and join in the applause!

## Playwright Biography



Mieko Ouchi (1969-present) is an actor, director and celebrated Canadian playwright based in Edmonton, Alberta. Her plays have been produced across Canada since 2003. Her first full length play, *The Red Priest* was a finalist for the Governor General's Award, and later won the Carol Bolt Prize. More recently, her play, *Consent*, won a Sterling Award for Outstanding Production of Theatre for Young Audiences. She has worked as Playwright-in-Residence at a number of

institutions, acted and directed in theatres across the country, and was the Co-Artistic Director of Concrete Theatre until late 2020. She has also worked in film and television, her award-winning film work being shown at international film festivals, and on CBC and Bravo. Mieko's plays are translated into six languages and have been finalists for a GG and the City of Edmonton Book Prize, and received the Carol Bolt Prize and the Enbridge Award for Established Canadian Playwright.

Her work often looks at historical events, often dramatizing situations and relationships of important figures. She has often studied her family history in her professional work, both as a writer, and a researcher, including the Japanese Canadian experiences of racism and internment during World War 2 her grandparents faced.

**Related Resource Links:** Find out more about Mieko from [The Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia](#) and the [Japanese Canadian Artists Directory](#).



A cycling Burner looks at an art installation in 2016. Photo by flickr user k8itts.

## Characters

**Dorothy** is a woman in her 60 who has recently lost, **Eugene**, her life partner, with whom she fell in love young, married and raised their three children with. The two of them complimented each other well, both artists, both free spirited and open minded, but in the pair, Dorothy often relied on Eugene for direction, both figuratively and literally. **Jason**, **Mieko**, and **Kevin** are her and Eugene's three adult children. Kevin, the youngest, is her travel companion to Burning Man, along with his friend **Hilary**. Many other characters pop up throughout the story, including, **Leonard**, a police officer who finds her in a tight spot, **Dan**, Jason and Kevin's friend who always has helpful advice, **Parveen** and **Dave**, strip mall security guards who help teach Dorothy how to drive her RV, an older couple who help her park at a nearby campground, a couple of friendly store workers, and many, many naked bike riders, to name a few.

## Content Overview

Some strong language, marijuana use (no real marijuana is used onstage).

## Plot Summary

At 63, Dorothy expected to jump into the RV and take off with her husband at the wheel. Now Eugene has passed away, and she is facing life without her co-pilot - so she makes a terrifying decision. She's going to Burning Man. In the RV she's never driven. To join thousands of revellers in the Nevada desert at the world's largest art festival. Along with her Burning Man-veteran son and his newbie friend, Dorothy journeys to shed the pain and grief of the past so she may fully embrace the future.

## Synopsis

**This section contains spoilers.**

Burning Mom is a one-woman show, where the actor spends most of her time playing Dorothy and also portrays other smaller characters. At the opening of the show, Dorothy is unanchored without Eugene, and unsure of what her next steps in life will be. This manifests in a disagreement with her children about what to do with an RV. She cannot drive the RV. She cannot let go of the RV. At the opening of the show, Dorothy gives herself one week to learn to drive the RV, and with the help of the security guards at an old strip mall, she unlocks her RV driving potential.

Testing her new skills out at a local campground, she realizes that what she really wants is to take the RV to Burning Man, a trip her and Eugene had dreamed about taking later in life. With the help of her youngest son, she undertakes the trip, learning to trust herself along the way. By the end of the festival, Dorothy has said goodbye to Eugene and feels renewed.

**Related Resource Links:** Hear Mieko speak about the real-life inspiration for this play on [CBC's Candy Palmater Show](#) (14:23).

## Context and Related Resources

### What is Burning Man?

While some might think of Burning Man as a festival, the organization itself doesn't use that descriptor. Rather, it is a community and global cultural movement, with events worldwide. The original event was in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, and now is "an annual experiment in temporary community" the nine days leading up to Labour Day. The Saturday night before Labour Day, a large wooden effigy called the Man is symbolically burned, leading to the name.

Throughout the year, people work to prepare for an event in line with Burning Man's Vision Statement: "Burning Man Project will bring experiences to people in grand, awe-inspiring and joyful ways that lift the human spirit, address social problems, and inspire a sense of culture, community, and civic engagement."

There are no acts or entertainment provided by organizers; instead, to build the temporary city at Black Rock, every participant contributes. People are invited to volunteer, create or join a camp, or make some art. Burning Man offers the opportunity to create interactive experiences to share and live in community. The goal is a "decommodified" space where all are valued for who they are instead of what they have.

Each year, there is a theme that art installations revolve around. In 2022 this is [Waking Dreams](#). Past themes have included Hope and Fear, Metropolis, Evolution, da Vinci's Workshop, Fertility, Metamorphoses, and more!

**Related Resource Links:** [See photos](#), [read blogs](#) by Burners, and [listen to the official Burning Man podcast](#), or independently produced [Burner Podcast](#) or [Accuracy Third](#).



Art installations and Burners in photos by flickr users Duncan Rawlinson, Meg, and Curtis Simmons

## Burning Man History

In the early 1980s, a sculptor named Mary Grauberger held summer solstice bonfires on the beach. When she stopped organizing these, Larry Harvey “picked up the torch” and built an eight-foot man with his friend Jerry James. This first burn happened on a beach in San Francisco in 1986. There were 35 people in attendance, and the man was 8 feet tall. It was relocated to the Black Rock Desert, where it continues to this day, following the intervention of police in 1990 when the group didn’t have a permit. The first Desert Burn was attended by 350 people. Along with burning the sculpture, the event celebrates art and community.

Over the years, the population attending the event has grown and has consistently included over 50,000 people in the 10 years leading up to pandemic. In 2019 there were nearly 79,000 people in attendance. The size of the man fluctuates, with all but two over 70 feet tall since the year 2000, the tallest reaching 105 feet.

**Related Resource Links:** Enjoy [photos from the 1980s and 90s](#) in this Huffington Post article, and explore more history with the [Burning Man Timeline](#).



Photos of The Man from 2019 (Curtis Simmons), 2011 (by mer) and 2010 (by Christopher Michel). Burning photo by Brett.

## Ten Principles

Burning Man operates under its "[Ten Principles](#)." They reflect the culture of the community that has developed organically and are guidelines for all who attend. While "Leave No Trace" is mentioned specifically in the script of *Burning Man*, the others are seen throughout. They include:

Radical Inclusion

Gifting

Decommodification

Radical Self-reliance

Radical Self-expression

Communal Effort

Civic Responsibility

Participation

Immediacy

## Controversy

While the "Radical Inclusion" policy necessitates all are welcome, Burning Man has been called out recently for the trend of wealthy camps that are created for celebrities and influencers who have folks set up camps for them and then fly in to experience the event. There is concern by some that they breach the "Radical Self-Reliance" and "Participation" Principles.

Further affecting the "Radical Inclusion" principle is the increasing cost to attend, with a ticket now costing more than \$400, bringing the estimated average cost to attend in 2017 to \$2348, according to Money Magazine. There are also concerns about the racial makeup of attendees, with an 87% white population (Wikipedia, Burning Man: Gentrification).

In terms of the "Leave No Trace" Principle, there has also been concern about the negative impact on the climate. Critics primarily cite the impacts of folks traveling to and from the event. There is also concern over how many bottles of water are used over the course of the event. A solar generator was permanently installed in the city in 2007, which provides an estimated annual carbon offset of 559 tons", however the event was estimated to be responsible for around 27000 tons of carbon emissions in 2006.

**Related Resource Links:** Burning Man's website has recent updates about [Diversity, Equity, and Radical Inclusion](#) policy as well as [Sustainability](#). Erin Douglas documents and celebrates the experiences of Burners of Colour at [Black Burner Project](#), a multicultural movement driving diversity at Burning Man.



## Glossary

**Boy's Day** is a Japanese tradition celebrating children, celebrated on May 5. One of the practices is to fly koi flags outside your house that symbolise the family members. Learn more from this brief video: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOG\\_kF325\\_E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOG_kF325_E)

**Blackfoot traditional lands** refer to the ancestral lands of the Niitsítapi peoples and range from the lower half of what is now known as Alberta and Saskatchewan, to the northern part of Montana.

**Burners** refers to attendees of Burning man

**MOOP** stands for matter out of place, anything that wasn't on or of the Black Rock Desert before the event began. Debris, garbage, plants, anything brought in by participants must be removed as part of "leave no trace."

## Questions to Consider

### Pre-Show

Consider goals or future plans you made when you were younger. Have you followed through on them?

What is your comfort level with trying new things? What is the most daring thing you've ever tried out on your own? What is the most recent?

One of the ideas integral to *Burning Mom* is the idea of letting go - of expectations, of plans, of grief - in order to discover who we are. Reflect on a time in your life when there was something you needed to let go of in order to return to yourself.

Imagine heading out on a week-long camping trip to the desert. What would be your must-haves for the trip?

What are your preconceptions of Burning Man? While people often associate Burning man with drug use and nudity, the Ten Principles the festival operates under suggest a deeper story. Consider the Ten Principles and how they may or may not inform some attendees' choices regarding dress and substance use.

### Post-Show

What would you do if one of your parents suggested a family trip to Burning Man?

The way attendees are welcomed to the festival is one example of the principle of Radical Inclusion, and the first ceremony Dorothy encounters. Describe a time where you've felt wholly accepted on arrival.

Considering the attendees of Burning Man exist 70,000 strong each year without money through gifting, decommodification, and communal effort, what of these aspects do you think could be applied to our everyday life? Is integrating anti-capitalist practices into everyday life something we should aspire to? Do these anti-capitalist practices ring false even within Burning Man, given the huge price tag on attendance?

How can we practice radical self-reliance and self-expression in our day to day lives?

Dorothy reflects in her journal, "Everyone and everything has something to offer. You are not just MOOP". What does that mean to you?

What is the best MOOP you have ever collected?

Dorothy experiences multiple instances throughout the play where she accesses bravery in order to try new things and fulfill goals she has for herself. She also accesses bravery in order to ask for help on multiple occasions. What do you feel are Dorothy's bravest actions?

How well do you feel Dorothy navigates her need for independence and her need for the help of her son? Do you think she manages the relationship well throughout the trip? How do you think Kevin feels about being her companion?

The word spiritual is used in relation to the experience of attending Burning Man, and in the play. The idea of looking for interconnectedness between attendees and each other, as well as with the natural world combined with the ceremonial aspects of the event nearly point to religion while simultaneously remaining free from its trappings. How does your spirituality sit in relation to the spirituality of Dorothy's experience?

Burning Man is often talked about as a place where transformation happens. Although we don't see Dorothy following the festival, how do you feel she had transformed through her experience?



Photos of a cyclist and RV  
by Nico Aguilera and Art  
Cars by Curtis Simmons



## Mental Health, Grief, and Bereavement Resources

For immediate help in a mental health crisis:

**KLINIC Crisis Line:** Winnipeg 204-786-8686; toll-free Manitoba 1-888-322-3019 24/7

**Manitoba Suicide Prevention and Support Line:** 1-877-435-7170

**Manitoba Farm, Rural, and Northern Support Services:** 1-866-367-3276 24/7

**Hope for Wellness Indigenous Peoples Helpline:** 1-855-242-3310 24/7

**Winnipeg Crisis Stabilization Unit:** 204-940-3633 24/7

**Winnipeg Mobile Crisis Service:** 204-940-1781 24/7

**Winnipeg Youth Mobile Crisis Team:** 204-949-4777, 1-888-383-2776

**Seneca Warm Line:** 204-942-9276 (24/7)

**Kids Help Phone:** 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868 24/7

**Canadian Mental Health Association** – has online resources on grief and can also help connect you to other services. <https://mbwpg.cmha.ca/documents/grieving/>

**Age & Opportunity (A&O) Support Services** - <https://www.aosupportservices.ca/our-three-pillars/counselling-services/counselling/>

Support services for older adults including counselling services and support groups.

**Thrive Community Support Circle** -

<https://thrivecommunitysupportcircle.com/resource-centre/counselling-wellness/>

Not-for-profit primarily serving Winnipeg's with free services.

**The Compassionate Friends** - <http://www.tcfwinnipeg.org/>

Offering understanding and support to anyone grieving the death of a child at any age.

**Palliative Manitoba** - <https://palliativemanitoba.ca/support/>

Support, education, and grief seminars as well as a volunteer-run telephone support line (not a crisis line but an ongoing phone-based relationship to help deal with grief).

Services include specific supports for kids and teens, an online support group for adults, and supplementary resources.

**Canadian Virtual Hospice** - <https://www.virtualhospice.ca/>

Discussion forums, and inclusive resources for palliative and end-of-life care, loss, and grief.

## Enrichment Guide Contributor Biography

“Oh hello there! I bet you’re wondering who Tala Gammon is. Tala Gammon is the worst kind of multitasker. You can find her roaming between the parks with her kids and dog. She also teaches Drama and English at St. John’s High School in Winnipeg. where she wishes her brilliant students would come to rehearsal on time.”

Tala has been writing guides for Royal MTC since 2018, and this is her second one of the 22/23 season. We are grateful for her insights and research; thank you, Tala!

Resource compilation assistance was provided by intern Tatiana Tuazon.