

ENRICHMENT GUIDE

# Yaga

By Kat Sandler


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TOM HENDRY WAREHOUSE



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# Yaga

## 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.



## 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



**Kat Sandler** is an award-winning screenwriter, playwright, and director. Onstage her most recent work includes; *Yaga* (Tarragon Theatre), *The Party and The Candidate* (The Citadel Theatre), and *Late Night*. Her play, *Mustard* (Tarragon Theatre) won the Best New Play Dora Award, and *Bang Bang* and *Yaga* were nominated as well. She won the Austen Film Festival's Fiction Podcast Award for *How To Build a Fire*. Kat attended the CFC/EOne's inaugural Adaptation Lab. She has written for *Kim's Convenience*, and podcasts for The Koffler Centre, CBC's *PlayMe* and *TwoUp's Limetown*. She has various on-camera projects in development with eOne, TB Content, and the Donaldson Company.

## Playwright's Notes

I've always been fascinated by stories, legends and myths. Like many, I was raised on a steady diet of cookie-cutter fairy tales and prince-rescues-princess-from-wicked-witch narratives, so when I first came across *Baba Yaga* I was struck by three things: the imagery of her chicken hut and preferred method of travel/bone grinding (mortar and pestle), her ambiguous moral code and finally, the fact that she had a name. Witches are so often defined vaguely by colours, geography or their protagonists (i.e. "White" or "of the West" or "the one from Hansel and Gretel") but here was a witch powerful enough to be remembered for how she operated, not just how she died (shoved into an oven, poisoned by an apple etc.)

I love that no two *Baba Yaga* stories are the same. She's usually described as old and ugly, and sure, sometimes she kills people, but she helps them too, when she wants to. Across the globe she's seen as everything from monster to a quest donor, wise woman to a goddess, trickster to saviour and everything in between. She's a morally ambiguous, complex female character - a villain and a protagonist, an antihero who does what she wants in the woods and refuses to be defined or labeled as one thing, and I think that's why she's so resonant with women today. After all, historically what we call a witch is just someone society has decided it's scared of, and what could be scarier than a powerful, sexual, brilliant older woman making and living by her own rules?

The play *Yaga* has become an exploration of shifting social ideas, tradition, ageism, and fairy tale villains, a mashup of my love of lore and legend, police procedurals and noir thrillers and my desire to give a voice to the wicked old witch.

## Characters

There are 14 characters in *Yaga*, performed by three actors.

WOMAN “A”, 50s-70s plays:

**Yaga:** a witch; old, ugly, evil, or so they say

**Katherine Yazov:** a university professor in her sixties

**Geena Sandeson:** Lily’s mother; a diner owner in her fifties

**Elena:** a naturopath in her nineties

**Janice:** a shy trucker in her forties

**Staff Sergeant Sidle:** in her sixties

WOMAN “B”, 20s-30s plays:

**Detective Carson:** in her thirties

**Truly:** a neighbour in her forties

**Pamela Riley:** Henry’s ex-girlfriend, a student in her twenties

**Lily Sandeson:** a waitress, Geena’s daughter, fifteen

**Anna:** in her thirties

**Deputy Murphy:** in her thirties

MAN 20s-30s plays:

**Charlie Rapp:** a private investigator in his late twenties

**Henry Kalles:** a student in his early twenties

## Content Overview

**This section may contain spoilers.**

Very strong language; mature content including explicit conversations about sexuality, descriptions of violent acts, and implied rape of a minor. The play’s central event is a murder investigation.

## Plot Summary

A cocky private investigator teams up with a small-town detective to find a missing person. The victim – if he’s missing at all – was a bad dog who left a trail of conquests in his wake. Top of the list is Katherine Yazov, an older professor with a reputation for bedding students. Is she a woman scorned? Is she a suspect? Or is she something more sinister? As the case unravels, predator and prey become indistinguishable, and no one is safe. In this murder mystery-revenge comedy, inspired by Baba Yaga folklore, Kat Sandler conjures a twisted fairy tale for a new age. Beware the wicked witch – her secrets are best left buried.

## Synopsis

**This section contains spoilers.**

### Act 1

The folkloric figure of Baba Yaga introduces us to her legend, and asks us if we are listening. She appears periodically throughout the play to tell us about her life and the realities of being a witch.

In a university dorm room, Katherine (a professor in her mid-fifties) is visiting Henry Kalles (a student, early 20s). At first she seems to be making him uncomfortable with her suggestive remarks, but it turns out that Henry has been angling to get Katherine in his room for some time. He even purchased a lizard and chopped off its tail to have an excuse to invite her over. It is implied that the two have sex.

Some time later, a private detective named Charlie Rapp comes to the police station. He talks to a female police officer, Detective Carson, about the mysterious disappearance of Henry Kalles eleven days previously. Carson believes that the boy just took off on a vacation, but Rapp believes that Henry has been kidnapped for his significant family fortune.

Rapp talks to a former girlfriend of Henry's, a boxer named Pam Riley. She tells Rapp to talk to "The Witch", and to someone Henry had interviewed for his podcast: a woman with a reputation for sleeping with a lot of younger men. That person turns out to be the professor, Katherine Yazov, who before sleeping with Henry was interviewed on his podcast about the witch Baba Yaga. We learn that Katherine is an osteologist (bone expert) and that she is unmarried but has a daughter.

Rapp goes looking for "The Witch", Elena, but the elderly woman is in the hospital. He discovers that Elena is Katherine Yazov's mother.

Rapp asks Detective Carson for her help once again. They go to a local diner and meet Geena, the owner/waitress. Carson has intercepted a copy of Henry's podcast interview with Katherine, which had been deleted online.

We see a flashback of the podcast interview. Henry presses Katherine to talk about Baba Yaga. He sees the mythical woman as a "wicked, ugly old witch", whereas Katherine is more interested in the motives of Baba Yaga. The two are served by Geena's younger daughter Lily.

Carson and Rapp interview Elena Yazov. She is old and frequently lapses into Ukrainian, but it is unclear how lucid she really is. Elena refers to Henry as a "bad dog" who is now "dust in the woods for the chickens". Elena is also waiting for a baby, and insists that "there must be three".

Later, Carson is upset with Rapp; she got in trouble for interrogating Elena at the hospital. Rapp introduces her to a truck driver named Janice, who saw Henry out in the woods with a woman on the night that he died. Rapp now theorizes that Henry was lured out into the woods by Katherine and killed. He notes that five years previously a man disappeared under similar circumstances, in the town where Katherine and Elena lived before.

Rapp meets with Katherine at her apartment. She tells him that she has an alibi for the night of Henry's disappearance. Rapp remembers what Elena had said about there being "three" and wonders if that means three women in the same family. He asks about Katherine's daughter Anna, and Katherine admits that Anna had met Henry shortly before he disappeared; however, Anna is now in Europe and has been for some time. Rapp brings up Baba Yaga again, and Katherine denies the existence of witches. The conversation turns flirty, and it is implied that Rapp and Katherine have sex.

## **Act 2**

We see a flashback to the first time Henry and Anna met. In spite of her dislike for her mother, and her kneejerk reaction to meeting Katherine's "boy toy", the two of them actually seem to hit it off.

Carson and Rapp meet back at Geena's diner. Carson reveals that the police have located a cabin in the woods that contained a sledgehammer, chickens, and Henry's hat. The cabin belongs to Anna (Elena's granddaughter and Katherine's daughter).

Rapp wonders if Anna and Henry started a relationship, and if Katherine got jealous and killed the younger man. He reveals that he has learned of a third young man who went missing in one of Katherine's home towns. That man was writing a book on Baba Yaga.

Carson and Rapp begin to theorize that Katherine and her mother Elena target men who disrespect women. The two of them get drunk together at the diner, and flirt.

Rapp revisits Elena at the hospital. She has flowers in her room, and tells Rapp that they are from her granddaughter Anna – meaning that the youngest Yazov is not in Europe as her mother had claimed. Elena reminds Rapp to "ask for the horns" when it's time. She says that Henry was a "bad dog" for what he did to Geena's daughter Lily.

There is a flashback to Henry at a party with Lily. Like he did with Katherine, Henry lures Lily into his room by telling her about the lizard with the chopped-off tail. Lily is young and uncomfortable, but he pressures her to stay. It's implied that she is sexually assaulted.

Rapp goes to speak to Geena. She tells him that her daughter got pregnant, but she was threatened by Henry's family and forced to stay quiet. The police did not help. Lily was taken to Elena for an abortion, while Henry kept bringing girls to the diner and making Lily serve them. One day Lily stopped Pam Riley (Henry's boxing ex-girlfriend) on her way to the bathroom and warned her that Henry was a bad guy.

Rapp storms into police headquarters and demands to know why Carson didn't tell him about Lily's assault, since it provides a motive for murder. Carson tells him that Henry's family bullied and paid off the police, and it was too late for a rape kit. Carson admits that she thinks Henry deserved to die, but that forensics from the woods revealed he was not the only victim at the cabin.

Rapp theorizes that the three Yazov women have been killing "bad men" for years and scattering the evidence at Anna's cabin. They realize that with Katherine's alibi and Elena's age, Anna must have been in town for the murder, and that she is probably hiding under the alias Pam Riley.

Carson interrogates Katherine Yazov, but does not get any information out of her.

There is a flashback of Henry and Anna looking for a place to have sex. Anna suggests her family cabin.

Carson meets Rapp at his motel room. Since the remains of Henry Kalles have been found, his job is over. The two have a drink and he tells her what he's learned about the tale of Ivan the Terrible, who escaped Baba Yaga after asking her for "the horns", which summoned a phoenix and took him away. Rapp and Carson start to kiss, and have sex.

Katherine calls the motel. She has escaped from custody, and is at the cabin in the woods. She taunts Rapp, and he and Carson leave to find her.

There is a flashback of Henry and Anna making their way to the cabin. She drugs him, but he wakes up to find Anna and Elena standing over him. He tries to run away.

Rapp wakes up in the cabin. Like Henry, he was drugged. Katherine is standing over him with the sledgehammer. Carson bursts in, and reveals that she was Anna all along. She is now pregnant with Rapp's baby, and when Elena dies there will once more be three Yazov women.

Right when Rapp is about to be killed, he asks for "the horns". They tell him that the horns only work in fairy tales, but after a blackout we see him wandering the forest in a daze. The local police interview him, but all he can do is ramble about witches and it's clear they'll never believe his story.



## Context and Related Resources

Don't worry if you're unfamiliar with the figure of Baba Yaga, the Slavic witch with a magic hut! *Yaga* will give you all the information you need on the legend while simultaneously offering a subversion of the traditional fairy tales. No background reading is required to enjoy the show, but your experience may be enriched by the following resources.

### Who is Baba Yaga?

For a quick overview of the Baba Yaga legend, check out this short article from Grunge, [\*The Legend of Baba Yaga Explained\*](#).

The PBS Youtube series *Storied* gives you a more in-depth overview of the Baba Yaga myth and her appearances in literature (14 minutes). [\*Baba Yaga: The Ancient Origins of the Famous 'Witch'\*](#)

The following podcast episodes explore Baba Yaga's folklore: [\*Which Witch? From Myths and Legends Podcast\*](#) (37 minutes) and a concise [intro from Lore and Legends Podcast](#) (17 minutes).

### Some Baba Yaga Stories:

["Baba Yaga"](#) from *Old Peter's Russian Tales* by Arthur Ransome:

["She Who Must Not be Named"](#) - from the Myths & Legends Podcast (38 minutes)

### Suggested Reading:

During the play, Katherine says: "You know, there's a time in a woman's life when people just stop...seeing you. Completely. You're no longer the maiden - not a sexual object, you're not the mother - no longer fertile, so no longer useful...then...what are you? The crone."

For more on this idea, check out [\*Hagsploitation: Horror's Repulsion Of The Ageing Woman\*](#)

*WE ARE THE GRANDDAUGHTERS OF THE WITCHES YOU WEREN'T ABLE TO BURN*. In 2019, Quartz published this fascinating article on the [resurgence of "the witch" as a form of feminist empowerment](#).

## Glossary

**Affable** (ə-fuh-bl) – Friendly and easy to talk to.

**Aspartame** (ə-spr-taym) – A low-calorie artificial sweetener.

**Etymology** (eh-tuh-maa-luh-jee) – The study of the origin and history of words.

**Houdini** (hoo-dee-nee) – A famous magician and escape artist.

**Machete** (muh-sheh-tee) – A large knife with a wide blade, used for cutting trees and plants or as a weapon.

**Menopause** (meh-nuh-paaz) – The time in a woman's life where she stops being able to bear children; usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55.

**Mortar & Pestle** (mor-tr and peh-suhl) – An ancient set of tools used for milling, grinding, or pounding. The mortar is a durable bowl, while the pestle is a small rounded club.

**Naturopath** (nah-trow-path) – A person who treats the sick using natural and/or traditional remedies.

**NDA** – “Non-disclosure agreement”. A binding legal document stating that the signee will not tell anyone certain private information.

**Osteology** (aa-stee-aa-luh-jee) – The scientific study of bones.

**“Pleading the Fifth”** – An American phrase meaning “I refuse to answer”. The fifth amendment protects the right not to incriminate yourself; generally taking/pleading the fifth means that you do not want to admit guilt by answering the question.

**Poultice** (powl-tuhs) – a piece of cloth covered with a medicinal, often warm substance, wrapped around an injury to reduce pain or swelling

**Vigilante** (vi-juh-lan-tee) – A person in an unofficial capacity who punishes those who have committed crimes.

**Zoological** (zoo-uh-laa-juh-kl) – Related to the scientific study of animals

## Questions to Consider

### Pre Show Prompts:

- Are you familiar with the name “Baba Yaga”? If so, what images does the name conjure up?
- Consider the word “witch”. What kind of associations do you make?
- Do you consider yourself a “believer” in the supernatural? Why or why not?
- Yaga has elements of fairy tales as well as 21st century mystery stories. What do you think makes a satisfying fairy tale? What makes a satisfying mystery story? Do the two have anything in common?

### Post Show Prompts:

- Look back to your thoughts before the show, on the words “Baba Yaga” and “witch”. Did Yaga contradict or enforce the associations you have with these words?
- Why do you think that myths and fairy tales continue to be retold?
- Kat Sandler began writing Yaga before the #MeToo movement, at a time when Jian Ghomeshi was in the news for his serial abuse of women. In an interview, Kat Sandler recalls arguing with a male actor about the ethics of writing female characters who are capable of pure evil.
  - o Do you feel that it’s laudable or problematic to write women who are sexually manipulative and evil towards male characters?
  - o Do you feel differently about these characters now than you might have at another point in your life? Why or why not?
  - o Do you think the #MeToo movement changed the way our culture as a whole might view characters like the Yazov women?
- Baba Yaga is not, as a folk figure, a purely “good” or “bad” character. Do you feel that’s true in the play? At the end, did you find yourself cheering for or against the Yazov women?
- Most scripts have a paragraph or more describing the “setting” of the play – that is, a description of what the stage in front of you will look like. Directors and designers may follow this description closely, or they may go in a very different direction. Write out a few sentences describing what the audience sees when Yaga begins. This might include props onstage, the background, what the lighting looks like, etc. List four things you noticed onstage and explain why you think the designers made that choice. Did you find these choices effective?

- All of the major characters in Yaga are capable of being quite manipulative. Describe one way that the following characters manipulate others to get what they want:
  - o Private Investigator Charlie Rapp
  - o Anna
  - o Katherine Yazov
  - o Elena Yazov
  - o Henry Kalles
- Yaga is written for three actors playing 14 different characters. Do you think the playwright had a reason for writing the show this way? If so, is the result successful?
- Look at the statement below. Do you agree with it, or no? Explain why.
- “In Yaga, women gain power by adapting traits traditionally associated with men, including as violence and sexual aggression.”
- Yaga deals with questions of feminist rage, toxic masculinity, and revenge by women against men. How do you feel about the binary of “feminine” and “masculine” in this story? Do you like the way Sandler handles these ideas? Do they make you uncomfortable in any way?
- If you had permission to change one thing about the production you saw, what would it be and why? This might be an element of the script, design, direction, or acting.

## Survivor's Resources

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Some of the events discussed in this play may be triggering to survivors. If you have experienced sexual assault, please use one of the following resources:

**KLINIC 24/7 Sexual Assault Crisis Line** – In Winnipeg: 204-786-8631  
Toll free in Manitoba: 1-888-292-7565

**Survivor's Hope Crisis Centre** (Interlake) – 204-753-5353 or [survivors-hope.ca](http://survivors-hope.ca)

**Heart Medicine Lodge/Ka Ni Kanichihk** (Winnipeg) – 455 McDermot Ave; 204-653-5820 or 1-888-953-5264; <https://www.kanikanichihk.ca/>

**SANE: Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner** (Winnipeg) – Health Sciences Centre; 204-787-2071

**MB Farm, Rural and Northern Support Services** offers free, confidential, non-judgmental mental health counselling for anyone living on a Manitoba farm or in a rural or northern community: 1-866-367-3276 or 204-571-4180. Live chat and resources online at <https://supportline.ca>

**KLINIC Community Health** - <http://klinik.mb.ca>

Provides health care, counselling, and education for people of every age, background, ethnicity, gender identity, and socio-economic circumstance. Klinik's crisis line at **204-786-8686** is open to people of all ages, genders and backgrounds. **You do not have to be suicidal to call.** Calling the Crisis Lines can be a good place to start when trying to sort out a problem. Klinik can also refer you to other services or programs. To register for counselling, call 204-784-4059.

**Manitoba Justice Victim Services:** <https://www.gov.mb.ca/justice/vs/sa/index.html>

**Winnipeg Police Victim Services:** 204-986-6350  
[https://www.winnipeg.ca/police/Units\\_and\\_Divisions/vss/vss.stm](https://www.winnipeg.ca/police/Units_and_Divisions/vss/vss.stm)

**Manitoba Trauma Information and Education Centre (MTIEC)** information and resources for recovery: <https://trauma-recovery.ca/>



## Sources

Kat Sandler's bio was drawn and adapted from [Playwrights' Canada Press](#).

Glossary definitions were drawn and adapted from:

[Encyclopedia Britannica](#)

[Cambridge English Dictionary](#)

On pleading the fifth: [The United States Department of Justice](#)

## Enrichment Guide Contributor Biography

**Jessy Ardern** is an actor and playwright originally from Winnipeg. She has a particular interest in new, immersive work as well as the adaptation of classic stories. Jessy has a BFA in acting from the University of Alberta. Selected writing credits include *Prophecy*; *The Fall of the House of Atreus: A Cowboy Love Song*; *Harold & Vivian Entertain Guests*; and *Queen Lear is Dead*. Jessy has received two Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Awards for her work as a playwright. Her first feature film as a screenwriter, *Connecting Flights*, was filmed in Edmonton and released in 2021; her work on the webseries *The Department of Paranormal Affairs* is currently in production. Her favorite recent play was *The Royale* at The Citadel Theatre in Edmonton, which she knew nothing about going into but which delighted and moved her.

Special thanks to MTC's intern Tatiana Tuazon for podcast recommendations!