



# The Play That Goes Wrong

## Enrichment Guide

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Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre is proud to call Manitoba home. Royal MTC is located in Winnipeg on Treaty 1, the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Anishininew, and Dakota people, 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!

## About the Creators

*The Play That Goes Wrong* was written by Henry Lewis, Henry Shields, and Jonathan Sayer. They are members of Mischief Theatre, a comedy theatre company based in London. It was formed in 2008 by a group of students and graduates of the London Academy of music & Dramatic Art. Originally, they specialised in improvised comedy, but now the company creates new comedy for theatre and television.



Lewis is the Artistic Director; he is an Olivier Award-winning writer, actor, and producer as well as the founder of The Mystery Agency, an online mystery game company. Shields originally went to school for nursing but changed his career path when he auditioned for LAMDA. Sayer, the Company Director, is also an Olivier Award winner and has taught improvisation in several post-secondary programs. Their first show was *Let's See What Happens* in July 2008, which they later performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. You can read their more detailed biographies in our Ovation programme!

The idea for *The Play That Goes Wrong (TPTGW)* came from the real-life experiences of the writers in their acting careers – they never had anything quite so disastrous happen to them, but did have experience with things going a bit awry. Influences on *TPTGW* include principles of improv – someone has an idea, and the team accepts it and builds on it – silent films, classic British comedy of the 1960s including Monty Python, and physical comedians Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Mr. Bean. Michael Green, who wrote a book called *The Art of Coarse Acting* is another major influence.

The playwrights were roommates at the time and writing together after work. To this day, when they work together, they are always in the same room, with one typing while the others “knock ideas around.” With three writers, they can troubleshoot as they go and build on each other’s ideas. Their writing process includes putting down a rough draft as quickly as they can, redrafting together, then reading the script through with other members of the Mischief company and creating one more draft. Then they workshop the script with actors and continue to tweak it through previews (or, in TV, after the initial taping). The process is collaborative and heavy on rewriting!

Sayer has said in an interview that “the reason people like an improv show is because it’s like watching a person walk across a tightrope. They enjoy the wobbles and the bits where the person nearly falls off, not just the safe passage. When we were starting to

write together, we wanted to create something that had that same sense of danger and also intimacy.”

Shields revealed that one of the team’s key techniques is to instill in the audience a sinking feeling as they realize something isn’t right. “It is the moment an actor realises they’ve done something wrong and there’s that horrific silence, everyone on stage freezes and nothing happens; they just feel that heartbeat in the pit of their stomach. That’s something we take a lot of time to finesse and make sure there’s spaces for it.” They have also learned that an effective writing tool is to “find one joke and then find ten other jokes that come out of it,” letting something evolve rather than adding more things. See if you can spot some particular props or set pieces that are the basis for a whole chain of jokes in this production!

**Related Resource Links:** The [interview quoted in this section](#) is from The Guardian. You can also read an [interview by Hanover Theatre](#) and [a Q&A with Sayer](#) from Belgrade Theatre.

[Watch a YouTube video to get to know the creators](#) (4:05) and learn more about the choices they made in this script.

Sayer, Shields, and Lewis share [things in their careers that have gone wrong in this video](#) from The Tonight Show (7:17).

When theatres were closed for the COVID-19 pandemic, the Mischief Theatre team created a podcast with interviews of each of their members. [Hear from the creators of TPTGW in podcast episodes 1 through 3.](#)

## Characters

All the characters are members of the Cornley Drama Society.

Dennis – An actor. He plays Perkins the butler in *Murder at Haversham Manor*.

Krista – *Murder at Haversham Manor*’s director. She plays Inspector Carter in the show.

Jonathan – An actor. He plays the role of Charles Haversham, who is killed, in *Murder at Haversham Manor*.

Max – An actor. He plays the roles of Cecil Haversham who is Charles’ brother, and Arthur the Gardener in *Murder at Haversham Manor*.

Robert – An actor. He plays the role of Thomas Colley Moore who is Charles’ old school friend in *Murder at Haversham Manor*.

Sandra – An actor. She plays the role of Florence Colley Moore, sister to Thomas and Charles’ fiancée, in *Murder at Haversham Manor*.

Annie – Stage Manager of *Murder at Haversham Manor*.

Trevor – Lighting and sound technician of *Murder at Haversham Manor*.

2 stage crew members

Find a list of actors who play these roles as well as their biographies, and those of the creative team, on [MTC’s show webpage](#).

## Setting

You are seeing a presentation by the Cornley Drama Society at the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre in the present. The action of *The Murder at Haversham Manor* takes place in winter 1922 at Charles and Florence's engagement party at his home.

## Content Overview

**This section may contain spoilers.**

Farcical violence, murder, infidelity, mild rude humour; use of the word "damn." A kiss between two men (one reading for a female character) played for comedy.

## Plot Summary

The Cornley Drama Society is bringing their production of *The Murder at Haversham Manor* to our theatre. They are excited to present this mystery set in the 1920s, but just like the title says, nothing goes according to plan. A play-within-a-play that features slapstick and farcical humour.

## Synopsis

**This section contains spoilers.**

*Written by Aliza Sarain for Theatre Calgary*

### Preshow

Before the show starts, the action story begins. The set is falling apart; the stage manager and the sound and lighting operator are fixing things. There is an important CD missing – and a missing dog. Things do not bode well for this production. The director of *The Murder at Haversham Manor* and head of the Cornley Drama Society, Krista Bean, welcomes the audience. She shares Cornley's "illustrious" production history, and brags that this show, her directorial debut, will be their best show yet.

### Act 1

The play begins, and there are problems immediately. The actor playing the deceased Charles Haversham trips on his entrance and is not acting terribly dead. As other actors prepare to enter, the door is jammed, and they can't enter the scene.

Thomas Colley Moore and Perkins finally find their way 'onstage' and attempt to get Charles's fiancée, Florence. Meanwhile, actors are forgetting their lines, props are not where they're supposed to be, and parts of the set are missing and falling down.

Thomas Colley Moore calls in Inspector Carter, despite a "snowstorm." Florence Colley Moore arrives but cannot get through the door, either, so—as "the show must go on"—she attempts to perform her scene through the window. Charles's brother, Cecil, arrives and, finally, and with the help of the stage manager, Annie, gets the door open. We learn that Cecil and his brother had a strained relationship, and that Charles was

jealous and paranoid. Cecil believes his brother may have committed suicide. In Charles's final journal entry, we discover that he doubted whether Florence really loved him at all.

Inspector Carter, played by Krista, finally arrives. He plans to do an inspection of the body, and the cast begins the process of removing it from the room. As you'd expect, this comes with its own challenges as Perkins and Thomas attempt to lift Charles from the chaise but cannot, so they roll him over and drop him face-first onto a stretcher resting on the floor. When they lift him, the canvas rips, so the two exit as if they were carrying a dead body out of the room. Inspector Carter follows. Then, Jonathan, the actor playing Charles, stands up and exits the scene. Cecil and Florence are the only two left in the room, and it becomes very clear that they are having an affair.

More incorrect props, missed cues, and an actual fire ensue. At one point, Jonathan, now upstairs, falls from the upper level of the set to the lower in a coughing fit, yet the actors go on. Inspector Carter questions Perkins first, followed by Florence. Near the end of her interrogation, Robert (playing Thomas) bursts into the room hitting Sandra (playing Florence) who collapses unconscious to the floor. Robert, Krista, and Max (playing Cecil) are now expected to finish the scene with an unconscious castmate. Inspector Carter questions Cecil as Robert and Jonathan try to remove the unconscious Sandra by dragging her through a window. After revealing to Cecil that he knows about the affair, the Inspector leaves.

Thomas Colleymoore receives a call that £9,000 has been stolen from his bank account. When he learns about the affair, he defends his sister's honour, and the men take their fight offstage. We hear the sound of multiple gunshots. Inspector Carter returns with Florence, except that now it's the stage manager, Annie, wearing Florence's dress and reading from a script. Cecil re-enters with three bullet wounds in his back and collapses, dead, on the chaise.

The first act ends, like all good murder mysteries, with Perkins, Florence, and Inspector Carter realizing that Charles Haversham's murderer is still in the house with them.

## **Act 2**

Krista, the director, appears again to address the audience, assuring them that this "hasn't been the worst first act Cornley University has seen." Act Two begins with Inspector Carter leaving the room to investigate the gunshots. Annie, filling in for Sandra, trips and scatters pages of script everywhere, losing her place, and causing all sorts of confusion. Max, who also plays Cecil, arrives as Arthur the Gardener. He was supposed to have left the grounds hours before, but the snowstorm forced him to stay.



During the scene, Max runs into the pillar supporting the upper level of the set and knocks it over, causing the entire second floor to tilt, nearly falling. Arthur the Gardener reveals a handkerchief he found on the grounds. It turns out to have traces of cyanide, the method used to kill Charles Haversham. Featuring the initials F.C., the handkerchief leads everyone to conclude that Florence must have killed Charles.

Annie (as Florence) is also knocked unconscious, and Sandra, who has come to, reappears in her underwear (since Annie is wearing her costume). She doesn't remain conscious for long, however, as she's knocked out by the door to the grandfather clock. Trevor, the sound and lighting technician we met before the show began, appears from inside the clock and is forced to read the role of Florence—that is, until Trevor falls under the tilted second story bringing the props and furniture crashing down on top of him. Sandra, who had been stuffed inside the clock after falling unconscious, is awake again but now stuck in the clock.

When the stage manager regains consciousness, she resumes her role as Florence. For the rest of the play, the two women fight over who gets to play Florence. Perkins, the butler, reveals that he knows who killed Charles Haversham: Inspector Carter. The inspector pulls a gun on Perkins, when Charles Haversham bursts through the door! He wasn't dead at all! He never consumed the poisoned drink that the inspector had left him. Inspector Carter reveals that he had been working with Thomas Colleymoore all along and that he stole the £9,000 and was going to double-cross him. Thomas tries (and fails) to shoot Inspector Carter.

The play ends as the walls fall down, revealing the crew working backstage. In the final moments, Charles offers Thomas a glass of poisoned sherry, who drinks it and dies at length. We never do find out where this performance ranks in the Cornley Drama Society's list of worst productions ever.

### **Bonus Activity from Aliza Sarian: Story Woosh**

This is an interactive storytelling technique that enables any kind of plot to come alive, even without participants having prior knowledge, like reading this synopsis.

- The teacher facilitates the shared storytelling by bringing individuals and groups in and out of the action.
- As soon as characters, objects, places, or events in the story (i.e., servants, bad thoughts, ships, etc.) are mentioned, the first students step into the circle and make a shape or pose that represents what has been narrated.
- At any time the teacher can say "Whoosh!" and students quickly return to their 'places' in a circle.
- Continue the story around the group, so that different students get to play various characters and everyone gets a chance to try several roles, regardless of gender.

## Context and Related Resources

### Play Within a Play

The precursor to this device can be seen as far back as ancient India, where layered stories known as a “frame tale” were popular. Passed down through generations of storytellers as an oral tradition, the outer story serves to lead to more inner ones. For instance, in the popular tale of *Scheherazade* (told to this day), the outer story is that of a king and a storyteller who saves her own life by telling a new tale to the king each night so that he'll keep her alive to hear the ending. The inner stories that she told to the king contained lessons, morals and are what can be considered the “guts” of the tale. Inner stories were known to change between generations, but were able to provide similar morals.

The concept stretches across cultural history. In France, the device is known as *mise en abyme* which translates into “placing into the abyss.” First used to describe when a coat of arms would have a small image of the shield inside a larger shield, the phrase calls to mind two mirrors facing each other with the reflections seeming to go on to infinity.

A **metadrama** is the specific term for when a playwright draws attention to the fact that the audience is watching theatre, like in *The Play That Goes Wrong*. An early play to use this device was *The Spanish Tragedy* written by Thomas Kyd in 1587. There, a play is presented in front of two “audience members” who commentate on the action. The play within a play became very popular in western playwriting with Shakespeare, who used the device in several of his works including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*.

A play within a play has continued to be used in western playwriting throughout modern history. From realistic works such as Chekhov's *The Seagull* to the revolt of realism as seen in Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and into more recent Broadway hits such as *The Producers*, *Something Rotten*, and *Moulin Rouge*, it can be used in many ways. In some cases, the inner play exists simply to entertain or forward the plot. By using this style, a playwright can comment on events in the play, highlighting aspects of real life that they want the audience to be aware of, and to comment on the narrative to encourage the audience to think. And of course, in *TPTGW* you have a third level: because you're watching it live, the production you see at MTC itself will be slightly different every time! Such is the magic of theatre.

### Schadenfreude, Empathy and Comedy

Schadenfreude is a German word for the concept of taking pleasure at someone else's troubles. It's a universal concept – there is a Japanese saying that “the misfortune of others tastes like honey” and a French phrase *joie maligne*, rejoicing in other people's suffering. When we watch *The Play That Goes Wrong*, we get to indulge this human



response, seeing the utter failure of the characters and laughing at their hardships, without risking hurting real people. Jonathan Sayer, one of the playwrights, approves of us “indulging our meaner instincts” by laughing at the characters. He says it’s “like watching a person walk across a tightrope,” and that we can “...enjoy the wobbles and the bits where the person nearly falls off, not just the safe passage.”

The show’s director, Dennis Garnhum, says that what makes this production a comedy is that the characters persevere. If they were to keep failing and give up as things fall apart, stopping the show and sending us home, that would be a tragedy of a play that went so badly it never existed. But because, despite it all, the show goes on, we can celebrate the hilarity. Sayer has also said that “a lot of the work [of Mischief Theatre] is about being embarrassed and humiliated and I think audiences really enjoy that. Everyone has been there, there is a global empathy for things going wrong in front of a group of people.”

But what is empathy? Generally, it’s our human ability to take on another’s perspective and to understand how they feel. We all know how it feels to have a day when nothing seems to be going how we expect or want it to. But because we know that these are characters onstage, that nobody is actually getting hurt and there are no real-world consequences to the events we see in front of us, and hopefully we can tell that the actors are having fun performing, the theatre becomes a safe place to laugh at these misfortunes as the Cornley Drama Society struggles along their journey to show us *The Murder at Haversham Manor*. It’s guilt-free schadenfreude, and it’s good for us!

Laughter has proven health benefits, including boosting immunity, lowering stress hormones, relaxing muscles, and more. And not only are we laughing at the antics, but we are also experiencing *The Play That Goes Wrong* in a theatre audience, sharing it with many others and seeing it live rather than by ourselves or on a screen. This is a unique and special experience. Studies have shown that audience members’ heartbeats synchronize at the theatre; “experiencing live theatre performance [is] extraordinary enough to overcome group differences and produce a common physiological experience in the audience members.” Empathizing with events onstage can make us feel connected to the characters and story, but just being in the theatre together and responding to the comedy can also connect us emotionally to other audience members – laughing at others becomes a community experience.

So, enjoy *The Play That Goes Wrong*, and feel free to laugh out loud for your health, for community building, to exercise your empathy, to support the performers ...and just because it’s fun!

**Related Resource Links:** Read director Dennis Garnhum’s full directors notes for the production in [MTC’s Ovation programme, on the show webpage](#).

## The Art of Farce

*The Play That Goes Wrong* is a comedy, a show intended to make the audience laugh, but to be even more specific, it is a **farce**. One of the oldest forms of Western theatre with techniques used as long ago as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE by Aristophanes, farces include larger than life characters, ridiculous or improbable situations, exaggeration, and horseplay or lighthearted violence. Characters tend to rely on their emotions rather than their intellect.

Farce is a “lower form” of comedy that may contain:

- stock characters with stereotypical traits
- mistaken identity
- mocking the typical social code
- rebellion – toying with the concept of what “should be done” and rebelling against that in a witty way
- comic surprises
- reversing expectations
- exaggerated physicality
- a fast pace to the dialogue and the action

The term farce comes from the Old French word meaning “stuffing/to stuff” which described pieces of buffoonery inserted by actors into the texts of religious plays. First used in 15<sup>th</sup>-century France, it described this single form of entertainment that combined clowning, acrobatics, caricature, and indecency. Theatre audiences at this point were dwindling, so these antics attracted more people.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Japan began to produce Kyogen plays, comedic intermission interludes in serious Noh plays. Later in the 1400s, farces were written independently and spread throughout Europe, with even Shakespeare incorporating elements. Because it gave people the opportunity to laugh, cope with the difficulties and overwhelmingness of the world, and gives a not-so-subtle opportunity to mock the elite, farce stayed strong through the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries where it found a new home in film, performed by stars such as Charlie Chaplin, the Keystone Cops, and the Marx Brothers. *Arrested Development* or later seasons of *Seinfeld* could be considered farce in television. It continues to be a popular form around the world.

## **Theatre People**

*Adapted from Theatre Calgary*

Theatre is a “team sport,” and it's not the actors alone who bring a production to life.

**The Playwright** writes the script, sometimes from an original idea, and sometimes adapted from a book or story, deciding what the characters say and suggesting the action.

**The Director** comes up with the vision for the production, deciding what messages to emphasize and the tone this production will take, and works closely with the actors and designers to make sure everyone tells the same story. They are an outside eye in the rehearsal room who can figure out whether what the actors want to depict is coming across.

**The Actors** use their bodies and voices to bring the playwright's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage. They embody what the characters are thinking and feeling and contribute ideas and experiment with how to portray this.

**The Designers** imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes, and sound that will complement and tell the playwright's story in a way that matches the director's vision. They communicate these ideas through words and visuals to the rest of the production team.

**The Production Team** is made up of artisans and technicians who find and create the props, sew the costumes, build and paint the sets, hang the lights and speakers, program the lighting and sound boards, and more.

**The Crew** works backstage with the performers once all these pieces of the show are created. They help with costume changes, move set pieces, and make sure all the non-actor components of the show happen safely and artistically as they should.

### **Spotlight on Stage Managers**

A stage manager is a leader of people who works with the director, actors, designers, and production staff to “facilitate a process where creativity can flourish” (Laurie Kinckman in *The Stage Manager's Toolkit*).

Winston Morgan, in his book “Stage Managing the Arts in Canada” describes stage management this way: “Stage Management is an art form. It is the art of working with people. It is the art of gathering and disseminating accurate and timely information. It is the art of interpreting ideas. It is about people, paper, and perception.”

A stage manager's work can be divided into three parts: rehearsal, technical rehearsals, and performance. During rehearsals the stage manager is responsible for organizing the rehearsal process, ensuring communication flows back and forth between rehearsal and the production departments, and record keeping for the show. During technical rehearsals, the stage manager integrates the technical elements with the work that has been done by the director and actors in rehearsal. In the same way a Maestro conducts an orchestra, the stage manager 'conducts' the technical elements of a show by calling (or initiating) all technical cues. They give warnings to crew members to stand by, or prepare for an element, and then by saying "go" they let the crew member know to push the lighting cue button, press play on a sound cue, move a set piece, etcetera. After the production opens, the stage manager is responsible for calling the show, maintaining the artistic integrity of the production, and ensuring the health and safety of everyone working on the show.

One of the exciting parts about being a stage manager is that every show is a new experience - no show is the same and no day is the same for a stage manager. Here are some typical tasks during the rehearsal process:

- Prepare the space for rehearsal – set out all the set, props, and wardrobe pieces needed for rehearsal.
- Record blocking, which is the entrance, exit, and movement of the actors on stage.
- Create a schedule for the day's work and keep everyone on task.
- Take notes from rehearsal (including requests for other departments) and share that information at the end of the day.
- Create paperwork that clearly communicated information from the rehearsal hall to production staff.
- Schedule fittings or activities outside of rehearsal (interviews, dialect sessions, meetings).
- Prompt – watch the script closely and if an actor asks, feed them the next line.
- Attend production meetings with the creative team and production staff.
- Check in with production departments to make sure they have all the information they need.
- Anticipate and address safety concerns.

**Related Resource Links:** Find more in-depth information about some of the many roles in creating theatre, including how students might already be building the skills to do these as careers, at [Royal MTC's Theatre People page](#).

Watch a [video about stage management](#) from the Guthrie Theatre (2:36).

Enjoy a [5-minute listen from NPR about stage managers](#) on Broadway.

## Glossary and Mentions

**Cuckolded** – A cuckold is the husband of an unfaithful spouse; comes from the word "cuckoo," a bird that lays its eggs in the nests of other species.

**Cyanide** – A deadly poison. Pronounced "sy-uh-nide" – Dennis says it wrong.

**Discrepancies** – Unexpected differences, especially in two amounts, suggesting that something is wrong or needs to be explained.

**Embezzling** – to secretly take money that is in your care or belongs to an organization you work for

**Enquiries** – Questions.

**Eton** – A well-known secondary school in England with many notable graduates

**Façade** – A false appearance that makes someone or something seem more pleasant or better than they really are. Pronounced "fuh-sawd" but Dennis mispronounces it.

**Fraudulent** – Dishonest and untrustworthy, sometimes illegal

**Grim** – Extremely bad, worrying, or without hope

**Hysterical** – unable to control your feelings or behaviour because of being extremely frightened, angry, or excited.

**Ledger** – a book in which things are regularly recorded, especially business activities and money received or paid

**Melancholy** – sadness that lasts for a long period of time

**Muzzle** – the end of a gun barrel, where the bullets come out

**Ominous** – suggesting that something unpleasant is likely to happen. Said "aa-muh-nuhs" - Dennis mispronounces this.

**Perpetrator** – someone who has committed a crime or violent act.

**Personal Effects** – things you own that you often carry with you, such as keys or clothing.

**Philanthropist** – a person who seeks to promote the welfare of others, especially by the generous donation of money to good causes. They donate money to individuals and charities and/or pay for things like schools that are good for society. Dennis also mispronounces this word; it is said "fuh-lan-thruh-pist".

**Pounds** – the standard unit of money used in the UK and some other countries. One pound is about \$1.75 Canadian today.

**Queer** – in this context, unusual or strange. This descriptor is more commonly used in the UK than in Canada.

**Scotch** – a type of whisky (a strong alcoholic drink)

**Sherry** – a type of strong wine, usually from Spain, sometimes drunk before a meal.

**White Spirit** – An accidental substitution leads to this substance being “drunk” onstage! A clear alcoholic liquid that is used for making paint thinner and

removing it from brushes and clothes. Called Mineral Spirit in North America. It is not immediately poisonous but would be very irritating to the eyes, throat, and lungs, and can be very toxic if absorbed into the body. Luckily in this play it is only unpleasant to the characters – what our actors ingest is faked, of course!

## Discussion and Writing Prompts

*\*Provided by Theatre Calgary*

- If you were to be part of a theatre company, which role would you want to have? \*
- Even a silly, funny story has a message the author wants the audience to consider. What is that message for *TPTGW*? What makes you think so? \*
- What was the last time you faced failure and pushed through to the end anyway?
- How do you think the members of the Cornley Drama Society could have worked more collaboratively on *The Murder at Haversham Manor* to avoid catastrophe? \*
- Jealousy becomes a huge problem in *TPTGW*. Have you ever had feelings of jealousy? How do you deal with these feelings? \*
- What surprised you about this play?
- What are some other plays, stories, or movies that you can think of that feature the play within a play structure? How do you think this structure served *TPTGW*?
- Use the list of common elements in a farce on page 10. What are examples of how these were used in *TPTGW*?
- Did you enjoy the farce format of this show, or do you prefer another type of comedy? Why?
- The original production of *TPTGW* has been running in London since 2012, with stints on Broadway, national tours, and independent productions all over the world. Why do you think it is so popular/why does it appeal to audiences so much? Why are theatres choosing to program this in their seasons in 2024?
- If you were helping to rewrite a new version of *TPTGW*, what is another character you might include and how would they be involved in the action? E.g. a wardrobe crewperson in charge of making sure everyone is wearing the right accessories, parent of a child in the audience who wants to climb onstage...



## Suggested Classroom Activities

*Provided by Theatre Calgary*

### **Sitting, Standing, Lying Down (15-minute activity)**

The joy and hilarity of *The Play That Goes Wrong* is in its physical comedy. This quick acting activity challenges students to think on their feet, justify their choices, and keep the action moving while in tune with their scene partners.

How do actors juggle everything they need to think about while onstage? The objective of this exercise is that students will be able to perform a scene while connecting to their scene partners.

- Choose three students to read aloud [this excerpt](#) from Act 1 of *The Play That Goes Wrong*, playing the parts of Robert, Max, and Dennis.
- In groups of three, have students rehearse the scene with the instruction that at any moment, one actor must be sitting, one must be standing, and the third must be lying down. The more the actors change position, the more fun and challenging the scene becomes.
- Remind students to keep the scene moving as best as possible. They should also be trying to justify their changes in position—lost glasses on the floor, standing to stretch, sitting down to tie a shoe, and so on.
- Once groups have had a chance to practice, choose volunteers to demonstrate.

Extension: Remove the script and have students improvise scenes using predetermined characters or settings.

### **Collaborative Playwriting (30-minute activity)**

The script for *The Play That Goes Wrong* was written collaboratively by Mischief Theatre out of the U.K. This collaborative playwriting activity will use a pass-the-paper model of improvised writing, where students work together without planning their ideas in advance. Students will think about how writing collaboratively is different than writing independently and the objective is that Students will be able to work in a partnership to draft a scene of dialogue that establishes characters, relationship, setting, and conflict.

- Start by pairing students together and providing them with either a [digital manuscript template](#) or [analog manuscript template](#) to use. Have them decide who will be writer A or writer B.
- [Model for the students how the process works.](#)
- Provide the starting prompt for the first line, e.g. that it must include “the show must go on” (a key premise of TPTGW)
- Once the first line has been written, Writer B takes over and silently adds Character B’s line
- Writer A takes the page back, reads the first two lines and continues with Character A’s response to what has been written. Writers continue this way for the remainder of the time, until they are able to end their scene.

- Within the first 8 lines of the scene, we should know who the characters are, how they know each other, and where the scene is taking place.
- Prompt students to reread what is written often, checking that they've established these elements, that their dialogue makes logical sense, and that the characters are listening to each other. When they're ready to revise, they should talk it through together.
- Leave time for students to read aloud what they've written and share examples with the class.

CHARACTER A  
(SINGING) THE SHOW MUST GO ON AND ON AND ON AND-

CHARACTER B  
Enough!

CHARACTER A  
YOU TOLD ME TO PRACTICE THE CHORUS.

CHARACTER B  
Well, I'm the leader of the band, and I say you've practiced enough.

CHARACTER A  
YOU CAN'T BE THE LEADER OF THE BAND. THERE'S ONLY TWO OF US.

CHARACTER B  
Well...it's my garage so...

CHARACTER A  
SO... (BEAT.) THE SHOW MUST GO ON AND ON AND ON AND-

Annotations:

- Characters don't need names yet
- Establish the characters' relationship right away
- Be explicit about the setting

### If...Then.... Designing a Rube Goldberg Machine (60-minute activity)

*The Play That Goes Wrong* features a series of unfortunate events that kick off a chain reaction that leads to disaster. This makes for a great starting point for a conversation about Rube Goldberg machines and the cause and effect of simple machines. How can you think like an engineer and artist to create a machine that creates a simple task? Students will be able to envision a multi-step process that combines simple machines to complete a single task.

- Introduce the Rube Goldberg machine [using the slides provided](#), including the three video clips from PeeWee's Big Adventure, OK GO!, and America's Got Talent, and review simple machines.
- Give students the opportunity to work alone, in pairs, or in small teams.
- Students begin by choosing the task they want their machine to complete.
- Follow the instructions to fold a page into 6 squares to sketch each step.
- Next, they will draw out their vision for their machine in 5 or fewer steps.
- Once they have planned out their machine and drawn out the simple machines they will use, they should determine and, if available, collect the materials they would use to build it.
- If time allows, students can start constructing their machine. Some groups may more quickly, and wherever students get to in the process is a success.
- Leave time for students to present their ideas to the group.

*This activity could also connect to Manitoba Science curriculum: cluster 3 in grade 5 (simple machines), grade 7 (forces and structures), Senior 2 (in motion).*

## **Some classic activities from MTC:**

### **Character Playlists**

Many actors use music as a tool in their preshow prep, playing the same songs as they get ready each day. Choose 8-10 moments in the play that affect the character, or 8-10 aspects of that character's life or personality, and select a song for each. Will you focus on emotions, the characters' circumstances, their actions?

OR

Considering all those aspects of each character, make one playlist that contains a signature song for each character in the show. Share this list with a classmate – can they tell which song goes with which character?

### **Write a Review**

Have students write a review of the play as though they are a reporter writing for a newspaper. Here are some guidelines: Think about your initial reaction to the play and explore why or what specific moments have led to you feeling that way. You can also explore the purpose of the play and the effectiveness of the production for the audience – how did others around you react? Was that the same or different than your reactions? Your review should have an introduction, body and conclusion that consider the following:

- The introduction should include information such as the title, actor, director and writer.
- The body should summarize the plot, give the setting, and comment on the characters and content.
- The conclusion should clearly state whether you liked or disliked the play and who you would recommend seeing it or not see it.

Finally, edit and revise your writing prior to submitting your work. You can also do this with a partner.

## Curriculum Connections

Attending Royal MTC's production of *The Play That Goes Wrong* 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 Music.

### Drama/Theatre

#### Senior Years:

Making: Learner develops language and practices for making drama/theatre.

DR-M1: Learner develops competencies for using the tools and techniques of body, mind, and voice in a variety of contexts.

Connecting: Learner develops understandings about the significance of the dramatic arts by making connections to various times, places, social groups, and cultures.

DR-C1: Learner develops understandings about people and practices in the dramatic arts.

DR-C2: Learner develops understanding about the influence and impact of the dramatic arts.

DR-C3: Learner develops understandings about the roles, purposes, and meanings of the dramatic arts.

Creating: Learner generates, develops, and communicates ideas for creating drama/theatre.

DR-CR2: Learner experiments with, develops, and uses ideas for creating drama/theatre.

DR-CR3: Learner revises, refines, and shares drama/theatre ideas and creative work.

Responding: Learner uses critical reflection to inform drama/theatre learning and to develop agency and identity.

DR-R1: Learner generates initial reactions to drama/ theatre experiences.

DR-R2: Learner critically observes and describes drama/ theatre experiences.

DR-R3: Learner analyzes and interprets drama/ theatre experiences.

DR-R4: Learner applies new understandings about drama/ theatre to construct identity and to act in transformative ways.

#### Early/Middle Years:

DR-M2: Learner demonstrates an understanding of and a facility with a variety of dramatic forms.

DR-M3: Learner develops competencies for using the tools and techniques of body, mind, and voice in a variety of contexts.

DR-CR2: Learner experiments with, develops, and uses ideas for creating drama/theatre.

DR-CR3: Learner revises, refines, and shares drama/theatre ideas and creative work.

DR-R1: Learner generates initial reactions to dramatic arts experiences.

DR-R2: Learner observes and describes dramatic arts experiences.

DR-R3: Learner analyzes and interprets dramatic arts experiences.

DR-R4: Learner constructs meaning and applies new understandings from dramatic arts experiences.

### **English Language Arts (Senior 1 through 4)**

*As the Manitoba ELA Curriculum is as yet unpublished on the government website, we are using the last published learning outcomes.*

General Learning Outcome 1: Explore thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences.

Express ideas 1.1.1

Consider others' ideas 1.1.2

Experiment with language and forms 1.1.3

Develop understanding 1.2.1

Explain opinions 1.2.2

Combine ideas 1.2.3

General Learning Outcome 2: Comprehend and respond personally and critically to oral, print, and other media texts.

Prior knowledge 2.1.1

Experience various texts 2.2.1

Connect self, texts, and culture 2.2.2

Appreciate the artistry of texts 2.2.3

Forms and genres 2.3.1

Experiment with language 2.3.4

General Learning Outcome 3: Manage ideas and information.

Make sense of information 3.2.5

General Learning Outcome 4:

Organize Ideas 4.1.3

Grammar and Usage 4.3.1

Spelling 4.3.2

Capitalization and Punctuation 4.3.3

Revise Content 4.2.2

General Learning Outcome 5: Celebrate and build community.

Cooperate with others 5.1.1

Work in groups 5.1.2

Share and compare responses 5.2.1

Appreciate diversity 5.2.3

### **Music**

(M-R1) Learner generates initial reactions to music experiences.

(M-R2) Learner listens to, observes, and describes music experiences.

(M-CR3) Learner revises, refines, and shares music ideas and creative work.

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