



# STAGE LEFT

SF ACTORS WORKSHOP  
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER  
MAGIC THEATRE

CURRICULUM GUIDE



*The Balcony, San Francisco Actor's Workshop. Photo: Pricilla Pointer*

## OVERVIEW

This guide is designed to accompany the segments of *STAGE LEFT* about the San Francisco Actors' Workshop, the American Conservatory Theater, the Magic Theatre, and Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Each of these companies played a significant role in building a vibrant and unique theater culture in San Francisco. And each company, in different ways, challenged traditional ways of creating and producing theater.

## BACKGROUND & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### Historical Context: American Arts and Culture Post-World War II

The 20th century saw the evolution of the American avant-garde; in other words, artists who pushed the boundaries of accepted societal and cultural norms. Avant-garde art, which includes theater, dance, music, film, literary and visual art, is distinguished by elements that are different from the majority culture. Avant-garde originated in Europe, but was evident in the United States as early as the mid-19th century.

During the 1930s and 1940s, the United States experienced the Great Depression and then World War II. In the 1950s, the country experienced peace and increased prosperity, therefore many people in mainstream society wanted to adhere to prevailing social norms and conventions. The prosperity of the 1950s also brought increased public and private support for the arts. Many artists and writers benefited from this support to develop ideas about aesthetics and artistic form that broke away from the traditions of realism and classicism. Furthermore, the social conformity of the 1950s provided many artists with something to rebel against.

Therefore, the 1950s were a decade of significant creative innovation. In painting and sculpture, this included the Abstract Expressionist and Minimalist movements, which both worked with images beyond realistic representation. In music, the 1950s saw the beginnings of rock and roll as well as the first electronic music, which both moved away from classical or traditional musical styles. The literary

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arts experienced an upheaval with the emergence of the Beats, a group of writers who challenged the conventions of the 1950s and traditional forms of poetry and prose. The Beats, which included Allen Ginsburg (Howl) and Jack Kerouac (On the Road), migrated to San Francisco in the middle of the decade and found an artistic home at the City Lights bookstore in North Beach. Founded in 1953 by poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, City Lights was an independent bookstore that supported the work of counterculture writers.

In the realm of performance, creative innovation and breaking with tradition manifested in a number of ways, from comedian Lenny Bruce, whose monologues pushed the limits of free speech and who was arrested multiple times for obscenity, to “happenings”, or performances in nontraditional spaces that broke down boundaries between performers and audiences. Artists like musician John Cage and his collaborator and partner, choreographer Merce Cunningham, broke down boundaries between arts disciplines and pushed the limits of what was considered music and dance. In Europe, the Theater of the Absurd evolved around the idea that existence was essentially meaningless, undoubtedly influenced by the horrors of World War II and the threat of nuclear war that followed. Absurdist playwrights included Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Jean Genet.

## The San Francisco Actors Workshop

Herbert Blau and Jules Irving, two professors at San Francisco State University, founded The San Francisco Actors Workshop (SFAW) in 1952. It was the city’s first theater founded after World War II, and exemplified the avant-garde of the 1950s by espousing leftist politics, collaborating with artists of other disciplines, and staging productions of the most controversial and challenging new plays. Absurdist plays were regularly produced, as well as the politically motivated and allegorical work of Bertolt Brecht. The SFAW also collaborated with experimental groups like the Dancers Workshop, founded by Anna Halprin, and composers such as Morton Subotnik, who created electronic scores specifically for the theater. Some of its most well-known productions were Genet’s *The Balcony*, Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, and Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. In 1965, co-founders Blau and Irving moved their theater to New York.

The SFAW’s goal of providing an alternative to producing theater destined for Broadway (which was and is a commercial enterprise that depends on celebrities to draw crowds), and providing a home for theater artists to build deep, ongoing collaborative relationships, set the precedent for the companies that followed it, such as the American Conservatory Theater (ACT) and Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

## American Conservatory Theater, The Magic Theatre, Eureka Theatre and Berkeley Repertory

A.C.T., founded by Bill Ball, found its way to San Francisco via a national tour in 1967. A group of arts patrons, including prominent businessman Cyril Magnin, provided the funding to keep A.C.T. in town permanently. Ball’s vision was to produce classic plays with a modern perspective; he also strongly valued building a resident company of theater artists who trained rigorously together. The

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theater's first full season included seventeen productions. A.C.T. became San Francisco's first year-round resident theater company and since then has become the city's most prominent theater.

During this time, the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of other theater companies sprung up as alternatives to A.C.T. The Magic Theatre was founded in 1967 by John Lion, a student at UC Berkeley. In 1969, the Theatre began a relationship with playwright Michael McClure, who had started his writing career as one of the Beat poets. His play, *The Beard*, was written as a conversation between American outlaw Billy the Kid and 1930s film star Jean Harlow, a structure that broke with conventional concepts of time and space.

McClure worked with the Magic for eleven years; this relationship established the theater's role as a home for some of the country's most imaginative playwrights. In 1975, the Magic offered a residency to Sam Shepard, including housing and the agreement to produce one of his plays each year. The residency provided Shepard with both the security of a home and the artistic freedom to write some of his greatest plays, including *Buried Child* and *True West*. The Magic pioneered the approach to working with writers over a long period of time, which nurtured the development of their work and gained the theater accolades and attention across the country.

The Eureka Theatre was founded in 1972, and helped launch the careers of playwrights such as as Danny Glover. In 1988, the Eureka commissioned playwright Tony Kushner to create *Angels in America*, and produced part one of the play in 1991. *Angels* went on to win a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony award and is one of the most famous American plays of second half of the 20th century. *Angels* was commissioned by Artistic Director Tony Taccone, who left the Eureka in 1988 to become Artistic Director of Berkeley Repertory Theatre, which was founded in 1968 by Michael Liebert. Taccone is still at Berkeley Rep, which has grown significantly, but retains its values of supporting the production of high quality, artistically adventurous theater.

## PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

1. Review the American Arts and Culture Post-World War II part of the historical context section with students. Ask them to consider the following question as they watch the *STAGE LEFT* segment:
  - What aspects of American mainstream culture, post-World War II, helped shape the values of companies like the San Francisco Actors Workshop? What was new and unique about their work?
2. Have students listen to Jack Kerouac performing "Beat Generation": <http://youtu.be/LytyTGCzSxM>; and have them watch Merce Cunningham and John Cage's "Variations V": <http://youtu.be/Ca2iVll-N0g>. As they watch the segment of *STAGE LEFT*, ask them to consider how the work of these three artists influenced or is reflected in the plays featured.



Sam Shepard's *Tongues*, Magic Theatre. Photo: Magic Theatre

## POST-VIEWING REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How did being in San Francisco nurture the work of these companies?
2. What is the impact of actors working together over a long period of time, or a playwright working with a theater over a long period of time?
3. Bill Ball of A.C.T. talks not only about "watering the tree, but nurturing the roots." What do you think that means in terms of making theater?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Audiovisuals:

Excerpts of Stage Left

<http://stageleft-movie.com/educators/excerpts/>

San Francisco Actors Workshop - Stage Left

<https://vimeo.com/53193388>

American Conservatory Theater - Stage Left

<https://vimeo.com/53195137>

Magic Theatre - Stage Left

<https://vimeo.com/53195593>

Excerpt of A.C.T.'s production of "The Taming of the Shrew," directed by Bill Ball

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdqOHvcD-VU&feature=relmfu>

Excerpt of Sam Shepard's "True West" with John Malkovich and Gary Sinise

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq4qH76O\\_5I&feature=BFa&list=PL62FB461B14BECB0D](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq4qH76O_5I&feature=BFa&list=PL62FB461B14BECB0D)

Sam Shepard interviewed about his "Family Plays"

<http://youtu.be/RDjtxabtdKs>

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## Websites:

Stage Left

<http://stageleft-movie.com>

Interactive timeline of Bay Area theater history

<http://stageleft-movie.com/timeline/>

A history of the San Francisco Actors Workshop

<http://www.sanfranciscoactorsworkshop.com/sanfranciscoactorsworkshop.com/History.html>

A history of American Conservatory Theater

[http://www.act-sf.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about\\_history\\_main](http://www.act-sf.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_history_main)

Berkeley Repertory Theatre past productions

<http://www.berkeleyrep.org/about/past.asp>

A history of The Magic Theatre

<http://magictheatre.org/about/history>

A history of the Eureka Theatre

<http://www.theeurekatheatre.com/History.html>

## THEATER ACTIVITIES

### Scene Study and Analysis

**Scene Analysis 1:** Break students into groups of four or five. Each group chooses a scene of three-five pages from one of the following plays: Brecht's *Mother Courage*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Genet's *The Balcony*, Shepard's *True West*, and McClure's *The Beard* (or you can select for them). This exercise could happen in the context of studying one of these plays (inexpensive used copies of these plays are available online or in bookstores). Have the group read the scene carefully and compile a simple scene analysis, using the following outline:

1. Sequence of events (what happens in the scene)
2. Setting (place and time, significance of setting)
3. List of characters
4. Text
  - Style of language (realistic, poetic, direct or indirect)
  - As an expression of character (how it helps define characters)
  - Use of monologue or dialogue
  - Rhythm (recurring patterns)

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- Debate or discussion between characters
5. Structure
    - Dramatic conflict
    - Climax
  6. Subtext (an underlying theme in the scene that is implied but not directly expressed)

**Character Study:** Have each student in the group choose a character in the scene (more than one student can choose the same character if there are only a few in the scene). Then ask them to write a character study, including:

- Name, age, gender, and race/ethnicity of character;
- Physical appearance (face, hair, height/weight, other distinguishing features) and style of dress;
- Birthplace or where they grew up and family members;
- Single, married/partnered, or divorced/separated;
- Career/occupation;
- Favorite activity;
- Deepest desire (or motivation: what motivates them/what they want most);
- Obstacle (what could prevent them from getting what they want);
- Deepest fear (what they are most afraid of in life).

If students do not know this information about the person they chose, have them use their imagination to make it up based on what they do know. Ask students to share their character study with their fellow group members and discuss the importance of each character: how they each contribute to the action and meaning of the scene.

**Scene Analysis 2:** Share with the whole class the definition of a beat as it applies to scene analysis: a single moment in the dramatic action of a scene. This includes physical action, character action (what is the character doing to get what they want in the scene) and the emotional action (what emotions are in play). A beat has a beginning, middle and end - it can be very short with just a couple of lines of dialogue or can take the whole scene. The beat is over when there's a change in the action (e.g. the characters turn to a new subject, someone enters or exits, a problem is solved, a new problem begins, a change in emotion). Review a section of one of the plays with the whole class and have students identify beats.

Then have students divide the scene into equal sections and each choose one section to work on. Ask each student to mark the beats by using a line or slash to delineate when one ends and another

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begins. Then for each beat, have them write a word that describes the subtext of the beat, and a word that describes the emotional tone of the beat.

**Performance:** Have students in each group divide into actors and directors for the scene. Then, using the scene and character analyses, have them rehearse the scene and perform it for their peers.

**Follow-Up/Reflection:** Ask students to discuss what they notice about the way the scene is written. Is it similar or different to other plays they know, and/or to movie scripts they are familiar with? How would they describe the style? Students can then each write a short scene about an event in their life in the style of the scene being studied.

## Interdisciplinary Extension to Scene Study

Once students have completed the above scene study, ask them to think about how they could introduce dance, visual arts, and music into the scene. Ask them to prepare the scene a second time with at least one moment of movement, one moment with music (they can download), and a moment with a visual image.

## REFLECTION FRAMEWORK

Prior to facilitating these activities with students, it may help to familiarize them with the theater terms in the toolbox, as well as reviewing the following framework for having students reflect on and analyze other students' performances.

After students watch their peers' performances, ask them the three following questions:

1. What do you see or hear? Have students be as objective and neutral as possible, focusing on what is clearly observable or audible.
2. What do you think or feel based on what you see and hear?
3. What questions do you have/what more do you want to know?

Many of the exercises also provide specific topics for students to reflect upon after watching the performance.

**Interdisciplinary Art:** A work of art that integrates different forms, such as visual art, music, dance, theater, or media.

**Resident Company:** A group of actors who are steadily employed by a theater to perform in its plays. Being in residence gives actors the opportunity to build longer-term creative working relationships with one another.

**Subtext:** Content of a theater script that is not spoken directly by the characters but is implicit or becomes something understood by the audience as the performance unfolds.

**Character Profile:** A description of a character, including physical aspects, personal history, and other aspects (fears, desires) that help create a more complete picture of who they are. A profile is used to create complex and compelling characters.

**Motivation:** Reason behind a character's action; what motivates a character to do what he does; what a character really wants.

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