

---

# COMPANY OF FOOLS

## Study Guide

---



THE NICETIES is presented by special arrangement with SAMUEL FRENCH, INC.

---

*The Niceties* is generously sponsored by The Kantor Family Fund, Marcia & Don Liebich, Carol P. Nie and Tedde & Jim Reid.

Community discussion with United Vision for Idaho is generously sponsored  
by Marcia & Don Liebich and Robin Leavitt & Terry Friedlander.

**24<sup>th</sup> SEASON SPONSORS:** Anonymous (2), Arrow R. Storage, Barrett Family Wines, Linda and Bob Edwards, Shari Friedman and Andrew King, Sue and Mort Fuller, Carol and Len Harlig, Jodie and Dan Hunt and the Roy A. Hunt Foundation, Marcia and Don Liebich, The Kantor Family Fund, Kenneth Lewis, Tedde and Jim Reid, Jane Rosen and Scott Miley—Scott Miley Roofing, Carol P. Nie, Shubert Foundation, Richard Smooke and Family in loving memory of Judith Smooke, St. Luke's Wood River, Mary Ann and John Underwood, Maryanne and Jerry Whitcomb, Jeri L. Wolfson Foundation, Barbara and Stanley Zax, housing sponsor The Wood River Inn & Suites, media sponsor Wood River Weekly, wine sponsor Stanton Barrett & Barrett Family Wines, and beer sponsor Warfield Distillery & Brewing

[svmoa.org](http://svmoa.org)



Sun Valley  
Museum of Art

# Table of Contents

- 1 WELCOME TO **COMPANY OF FOOLS** & THE LIBERTY THEATRE
- 2 ABOUT THE PLAY
- 3 ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT
- 4 ENGAGING STUDENTS BEFORE & AFTER THE SHOW
- 5 CAST & CREATIVE TEAM
- 6 IDAHO CONTENT STANDARDS & RESOURCES

## Welcome to **COMPANY OF FOOLS**

Dear Educator,

Company of Fools is pleased to offer you this study guide to prepare you and your students for our performance of *THE NICETIES*, by Eleanor Burgess. Working with schools is a fundamental part of Company of Fools' and Sun Valley Museum of Art's mission.

We hope this study guide will serve as a useful resource for you as educators and parents. It is designed to enhance student learning both before and after the performance, to support your classroom lesson plans and deepen the educational value of your students' experience. The resources and activities in this study guide support the Idaho Content Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy for grades 8–12.

Thank you for the sharing the magic of performing arts with your students!

—Company of Fools



**CONTENT ADVISORY:** This play discusses race relations, racism, institutional racism, and white supremacy in a frank and adult manner, and also includes themes of an adult nature.

**RECOMMENDED AGE:** This play is appropriate for audiences aged 16 years and older.

**APPROXIMATE RUN TIME:** *The Niceties* is approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes, including one 15-minute intermission.

# About the Play—THE NICETIES

---

At an elite East Coast university, an ambitious young black student and her esteemed white professor meet to discuss a paper the college junior is writing about the American Revolution. They're both liberal. They're both women. They're both brilliant. But very quickly, discussions of grammar and Google turn to race and reputation, and before they know it, they're in dangerous territory neither of them had foreseen — exposing dangerous divides that turn a private debate into a public war.

In November 2015, students at Yale University filled the campus courtyards in protest, prompting a tense national debate about free speech, racial insensitivity and cultural appropriation. These protests initiated a domino effect at other colleges and universities, making news headlines and engaging the general public in the conflict between a divided administrative and student body.

The event that instigated the turmoil occurred a few days before Halloween when the university's Intercultural Affairs Committee sent an email to the student body urging them not to wear costumes that were "culturally unaware and insensitive." Yale Lecturer Erika Christakis took issue with the committee's email and took it upon herself to send one of her own, encouraging students to wear what they like and accusing academic administrations of deliberate censorship and of becoming too prohibitive. Christakis' response outraged many students, who took to social media and public protests to express their disappointment, demanding that colleges be more proactive about supporting minority students and providing better mental health resources.

The controversy, and the scale to which it grew, did not escape the attention of playwright Eleanor Burgess, a graduate of Yale University herself. Eleanor credits the Halloween email controversy and the subsequent response as being the impetus for writing *The Niceties*.

"*The Niceties* is a powder-keg of a play," says Scott Palmer, Producing Artistic Director of Company of Fools, who also directs the Idaho premiere of Burgess' play. "It is complex, shocking, funny, insightful, and ultimately very challenging to audiences. We live in such a polarized culture, where truth and facts are constantly questioned, and where one person's perspective can easily become another person's trigger. *The Niceties* is not simple; there are no easy answers here, but the questions that are raised by this play are crucial for everyone to consider."

*The Niceties* premiered at the Huntington Theatre in 2018.



# About the Playwright—ELEANOR BURGESS

---



**ELEANOR BURGESS (Playwright)** Eleanor Burgess’s plays include *THE NICETIES*, *START DOWN*, *CHILL*, and *THESE DYING GENERATIONS*. Her work has been produced at Manhattan Theatre Club, McCarter Theatre Center, Geffen Playhouse, Huntington Theatre Company, the Alliance Theatre, the Contemporary American Theatre Festival, Merrimack Repertory Theatre, Portland Stage Company, and Centenary Stage, and developed with The New Group, New York Theatre Workshop, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Alley Theatre, Writers Theatre, Milwaukee Rep, Salt Lake Acting Company, the Hermitage Artists Retreat, the Lark Play Development Center, and the Kennedy Center/NNPN MFA Playwrights Workshop. She’s also been a member of the Dorothy Strelsin New American Writers Group at Primary Stages, Page 73’s writers’ group Interstate 73, The Civilians’ R&D Group, and New York Theatre Workshop’s 2050 Fellowship. Originally from Brookline, Massachusetts, she studied history at Yale College and recently completed an MFA in dramatic writing at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts.

“*The Niceties* was originally inspired by an incident that happened at Yale in the fall of 2015 — when the school’s administration sent an email cautioning students against wearing ‘racially or ethnically offensive Halloween costumes’ — and the conversations and arguments that cropped up in its wake. I became obsessed with how dysfunctional those conversations were, and with how deep the divisions in this seemingly unified community really ran. I didn’t know what to think, and when I don’t know what to think, I start writing to try to find out.”

—Eleanor Burgess

## About the Post-Show Facilitated Discussion

---

As part of Company of Fools’ presentation of Eleanor Burgess’ *The Niceties*, we are proud to partner with **United Vision for Idaho** for our post-show discussions. *The Niceties* explores the relationship between an ambitious black student and her esteemed white professor. The play is a “debate play,” in which two strong women engage in a powerful discussion of race, privilege, and power dynamics. It is a compelling, fraught, and complex story that touches on many of the topics that are relevant to American’s today.



We are proud to present an opportunity for our student audiences to participate in a facilitated discussion immediately after the student matinee with professional facilitators from United Vision for Idaho who will explore the issues in the play in a thoughtful, open, and respectful way. United Vision for Idaho will ask students to consider their reactions to the play and how issues of race and power are often deeply embedded in context. United Vision Idaho facilitators will discuss the notion of “the other,” asking students to think broadly about themselves as part of a larger system.

United Vision for Idaho has been providing critical resources that allow individuals to examine the escalation of discrimination and contextualize contemporary events within a social justice rights framework both here in Idaho and across the country.

United Vision for Idaho believes that in order to truly address injustice, our educational programming must work to confront the root causes that impact marginalized communities at disproportionate rate. Systemic discrimination and intersectionality are mobilized as a framework to understand the critical social issues. Delivered to over 2500 students and 450 community members statewide as well as national and international audiences, our programming and services blend education, leadership development strategies and advocacy initiatives to expand to reshape public debate in a way that brings a core human rights value system to the forefront.

# Engaging Students **★ START THE CONVERSATION!**

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER **BEFORE** SEEING THE PLAY

1. Think of a major historical event and what you know about it. Whose point of view has been included and whose has been left out?
2. What disagreements have you experienced with a younger or older person that might be the result of growing up in different eras?
3. Am I a good listener? What might the benefits of active listening be in my home life or workplace? compare?



## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER **AFTER** SEEING THE PLAY

1. What themes do you recognize as most important in the play?
2. Did this play affirm or challenge what your understanding of “history” is? If so, how? If not, why?
3. Did the encounters between the student and the adult remind you of your own? If so, how? If not, why?
4. How did the set, costumes, props, lighting, and sound contribute to the impact of the show?



## WAYS TO ENGAGE STUDENTS **AFTER** SEEING THE PLAY **★ TEACHER TIP!**

Using the above questions as potential prompts, here are some ways to encourage further examination of the play-going experience.

### Explore

WRITE A SCENE, SHORT PLAY  
OR STORY ABOUT EQUALITY  
OR SOCIAL JUSTICE

WRITE AN  
ALTERNATIVE ENDING

### Analyze

DRAW A CONNECTION  
TO A CURRENT EVENT  
OR CULTURAL REFERENCE

### Interact

IMPROVISE SCENES  
TALK TO OTHERS IN YOUR  
COMMUNITY ABOUT CIVIL  
DISOBEDIENCE



# Cast & Creative Team

## CAST:

Janine Bosko..... CLAUDIA MCCAIN\*  
Zoe Reed.....ALEXIS ULRICH\*



\* Member of Actor's Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States  
\*\* Member of United Scenic Artists, I.A.T.S.E. Local 829

## CREATIVE TEAM:

Direction ..... SCOTT PALMER  
Costume Design.....MARIA GERHARDT  
Lighting Design.....MARANDA JENKINS  
Production Stage Management ..... K.O. OGILVIE\*

Scenic Design ..... JOE LAVIGNE  
Production Assistant  
/Dramaturg .....CHRIS HENDERSON  
Technical Direction.....PATRICK SZCZOTKA



### CLAUDIA MCCAIN

(Janine Bosko) is honored to explore this notable play with her brilliant friends at Company of Fools. Selected CoF productions include *Clybourne Park*, *Collected Stories*, *The Glass Menagerie*,

*Steel Magnolias*, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, and *Talley's Folly*. Recently she appeared in Sawtooth Productions' *Outside Mullingar* and *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Favorite roles include Vivian Bearing in *Wit*, Emily Dickinson in *The Belle of Amherst*, and Sylvia in *Sylvia* for New Theatre Co. A local arts advocate, Claudia currently serves on the board of the Ketchum Arts Commission and the SUN Airport Art Committee. She thanks everyone at CoF, especially Scott, Alexis, Denise, and K.O.



### ALEXIS ULRICH (Zoe Reed)

is thrilled to return to the Liberty Theatre stage after previously playing Lydia Wickham in *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley*. Alexis is from Twin Falls, Idaho, and is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree in theatre at Idaho State University.

Some of her favorite roles include Queen Elizabeth I in *Shakespeare in Love*, Deloris in *Sister Act*, and Elizabeth Proctor in *The Crucible*. She's excited to be performing for you tonight and hopes you enjoy the show!

### MARIA GERHARDT (Costume Design)

and her family moved to the Wood River Valley 20 years ago. She began assisting backstage while her kids were students at the Sun Valley Community School, doing whatever she could to help with costuming and set design. With a creative mind and self-taught knowledge of sewing, she altered clothing, designed garments from scratch, and created fabulous costumes for the elementary, middle, and high school theater productions. She also assisted with costuming for plays at the nexStage Theater, St. Thomas Playhouse, The Spot, and CoF's *Life Sucks*, *A Day in Hollywood/A Night in Ukraine*,

*Bright Half Life*, *Striking 12*, *Woody Guthrie's American Song*, *Heisenberg*, and *Cry It Out*. Maria often says she missed her calling, but she appreciates the opportunity to be involved in the creative process which contributes to fantastic theatrical productions.

### CHRIS HENDERSON (Production Assistant/Dramaturg)

is a Company Artist with Company of Fools. A graduate of Boise State's Theatre Arts program, he appeared in the ensemble of BSU's *Urinetown: The Musical* and was assistant stage manager for BSU's *Crimes of the Heart* and *This Is Our Youth*. He was the sound designer for CoF's *4000 Miles* and *Crimes of the Heart*. Chris joined Company of Fools in 2017 as a season apprentice and is now working full time as its production assistant.

### MARANDA JENKINS (Lighting Design)

is a native of Chicago, Illinois, and is thrilled to be joining Company of Fools this season to design for *The Niceties*. A recent graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, she held campus jobs that allowed her to continue practicing her lighting design for student groups and campus visitors such as Nick Offerman and Barack Obama. Maranda's credits include lighting designer for *Big Fish* (2015), *Spring Awakening* (2016), *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley* (2017), *Gloria* (2019), company manager at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival (2019), and theatre management apprentice at Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago (2019).

**JOE LAVIGNE (Set Design)** has been a resident of the Wood River Valley since 1995. He holds a degree in theatre design from Boise State University. While at BSU, Joe's first realized set design, *Dante*, earned a regional KCACTF scenic design award. Since 2006, Joe has designed numerous plays for each season at CoF. Highlights include *K2*, *Doubt*, *God of Carnage*, *Other Desert Cities*, *Enchanted April*, *Peter and the Starcatcher*, *Proof* and *4000 Miles*. Joe thanks Scott for the opportunity to work with the CoF family once again. He is also eternally grateful to Denise and Rusty for starting the journey; John for his ever-present essence; and, as always, Jen and Ava for their support and spark.

### K.O. OGILVIE (Production Stage Management)

worked in the L.A. area as a stage manager for theatre and dance, an event coordinator for Universal Studios, and an art department assistant in film before becoming a full-time Valley resident in 2004. She has been Stage Manager for the Fools since the 2005/2006 season and is now the Company's Production Manager. When not managing at work, K.O. manages to have fun with her wife, two dogs and her cat.

### SCOTT PALMER (Direction)

received his bachelor's degree from the University of Oregon, earned his master's degree from Oregon State University, and studied for his Ph.D. in Contemporary Theatre Practice at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. He is the founder of both Glasgow Repertory Company (Scotland's only Shakespeare-dedicated theatre company) and Bag&Baggage Productions, a professional theatre based in the suburbs of Portland, Oregon. Scott joined Sun Valley Museum of Art as Producing Artistic Director of Company of Fools after 15 years of artistic leadership in Oregon, active involvement with the Theatre Communications Group and National Theatre Conference, and more than 20 years as a director and internationally recognized adapter of classical dramatic literature. In addition to his work as a director, Scott has also worked in cultural policy, advocacy, capital campaign fundraising, and social justice/equity work in the performing arts.

### PATRICK SZCZOTKA (Technical Direction)

As a San Diego native, Patrick spent time building sets for high school productions and honing the craft of underwater basket weaving. He received his bachelor's degree in technical theatre from Sonoma State University in Napa Valley, California. Szczotka is a recent MFA graduate of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he studied technical direction in scenic technology. During the summers, he worked in upstate New York as a safety coordinator at Glimmerglass Festival and a technical director at Hangar Theatre. Patrick is extremely excited to work with Company of Fools/Sun Valley Museum of Art and serve the Wood River Valley community.

# Idaho Content Standards

---

Reading Standards for Literature that apply to THE NICETIES, Company of Fools performance.

## KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

**8TH GRADE:** Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

**9TH–10TH GRADE:** Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

## CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

**8TH GRADE:** Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.

**11TH–12TH GRADE:** Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

## INTEGRATION OF KEY IDEAS

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

**9TH–10TH GRADE:** Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible, or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).

**11TH–12TH GRADE:** Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text.

**MATERIALS FOR THIS STUDY GUIDE WERE GATHERED FROM THESE SOURCES:**

<http://www.sde.idaho.gov/academic/shared/ela-literacy/booklets/ELA-Literacy-Standards.pdf>

<https://www.uvidaho.org/>