The Foreigner Study Guide

The Foreigner by Larry Shue

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Introduction

The Foreigner was first produced at the Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Repertory Theatre in January of 1983, and the boisterous laughter it created there made the play an enormous local success. Named by the American Theatre Critics Association as one of the best regional theatre plays for the 1983-1984 season, *The Foreigner* was subsequently produced Off-Broadway in November of 1984 at the Astor Place Theatre in New York City. Lukewarm responses from the critics failed to quench the play's enormous audience appeal, and as Laurie Winer reported in a 1988 *New York Times* article, "one of the few Off Broadway plays to overcome negative reviews, *The foreigner* played 685 performances and fully recouped its $250,000 investment."

Because of the extraordinary commercial success of *The Foreigner*, Shue's other plays came to the attention of American theatre companies. His earlier farce, *The Nerd*, had gone from its successful Milwaukee production in 1981 to similarly successful productions in England. It played in Manchester in 1982 and at the Aldwych Theatre in London in 1984, where it earned more money than any other American play on the West End. Two years after Shue's death, in 1987, *The Nerd* was produced on Broadway, and eventually his more serious play, *Wenceslas Square* (1984), became popular as well. These plays are now staples of university, regional, and community theatres all over America.

In 1980, Shue studied with a theatre company in Japan. He developed the central idea for *The Foreigner* when he discovered that the Japanese would tolerate even his most bizarre behavior (because he was unaware of Japanese social customs), dismissing his inappropriate actions as the conduct of an outsider. *The Foreigner* remains Shue's most highly regarded work and is considered the most perfectly realized of his plays.

Author Biography

Larry Shue's promising career as a comic playwright was cut short by his untimely death in a plane crash at the age of thirty-nine. Possessed of considerable technical skill, Shue had yet to prove that his stage comedy could rise above its commercial value and express a sophisticated comic vision.

Born July 23,1946, in New Orleans, Louisiana, Shue grew up in Kansas and Illinois, displaying an early interest in theatre; as a ten-year-old, he would create plays in his family's garage and charge a penny for admission. After participating in high school dramatics, Shue attended Illinois Wesleyan University and graduated with a B.F.A. in theatre in 1968. As an undergraduate, Shue wrote two plays produced at Illinois Wesleyan, but he began his professional theatrical life as an actor.

After serving in the entertainment division of the United States Army from 1969 to 1972, Shue continued his acting career with the Harlequin Dinner Theatres in both Washington, D.C., and Atlanta, Georgia, winning two acting awards in Atlanta in 1977.

As an actor, Shue joined the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1977. Two years later his one-act play, *Grandma Duck Is Dead* (1979), launched his mature playwrighting career. Shue was named Playwright in Residence for Milwaukee Rep in 1979 and his mature, full-length plays soon followed, including the two works for which he is best known—*The Nerd* (1981) and *The Foreigner* (1983)—as well as his more serious play, *Wenceslas Square* (1984). Shue's acting career also included a stint with the Berkeley Repertory company in California, some brief appearances in films, and work on the well-known television soap opera *One Life to Live*.

Shue was among fourteen people who died in a commuter plane crash near Weyer' s Cave, Virginia, on September 23,1985. The plane crashed into Hall Mountain, killing everyone aboard, as the flight approached the Shenandoah Valley airport between Staunton and Harrisonburg. At the time of his death, Shue's fortunes were clearly rising. *The Nerd* had been a phenomenal success in London, *The Foreigner* was still running in New York, and he had been commissioned by the Disney studio to write a screenplay for the latter play. He was also working on the script for a comedy series for CBS, had been commissioned to write the book for a Broadway musical based on *The Honeymooners* television series, and he was about to make his Broadway acting debut in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

Many feel that had Shue lived longer he might have produced an even more impressive body of drama, both serious and comic. In a *Chicago Tribune* obituary, Richard Christiansen asserted that, at the time of his death, Shue's "career was building to a level of international fame."

Plot Summary

Act I, scene i

It is a stormy night in spring as two Englishmen, Staff Sergeant "Froggy" LeSueur and his friend Charlie Baker, enter the log cabin fishing lodge owned and operated by Betty Meeks in Tilghman County, Georgia, two hours South of Atlanta. Every year, Froggy serves as a weekend demolition instructor for the American army, and this year he has brought his shy and sad friend, Charlie, to America in an attempt to cheer him up. Back in England, Charlie's wife is apparently dying.

After they arrive, Charlie is still inconsolably sad. For twenty-seven years Charlie has been a proofreader for a science fiction magazine, and he reveals that his wife finds him so boring that she regularly cheats on him. As uncomfortably shy as he usually is talking with people, Charlie is now terrified about being left alone for three days with strangers while Froggy leads his training sessions. Froggy promises to come up with some kind of plan to keep Charlie from having to talk to people.

In a conversation alone with Betty, Froggy learns that the proprietor is in danger of losing her lodge because the county property inspector, Owen Musser, is about to condemn the building as unsafe. Betty's current guests at the lodge include Catherine Simms (heiress of a very large local fortune), Catherine's fiance (the Reverend David Marshall Lee), and Catherine's younger brother, Ellard, who appears to be a "half-wit." If Betty has to sell the house, Catherine and David plan to buy it.

Froggy arrives at a solution to Charlie's problem. He tells Betty that Charlie is a foreigner who is ashamed of not understanding English and mustn't be spoken to. Betty is excited about meeting a foreigner, but, alone with Froggy, Charlie says he can't pull off the ruse. Froggy agrees and leaves, telling Charlie to simply explain the joke to Betty. However, Catherine comes into the room, does not see Charlie, and angrily confronts David with the news that she is pregnant. When Catherine discovers Charlie, she is outraged that anyone would eavesdrop on her "real personal conversation." Charlie is about to offer an excuse, but when Betty enters and explains that Charlie doesn't understand English (saying "an' Frog wouldn't lie to me"), Charlie feels trapped in Froggy's wild plan.

The mean-spirited Owen Musser then enters and everyone leaves but Charlie and David. Owen and David talk freely in front of the "foreigner," and thus Charlie overhears the two men's plan to buy Betty's fishing lodge and turn it into a headquarters for the Ku Klux Klan, which David jokingly refers to as a "good Christian hunt club." As long as the necessary brickwork on the foundation remains undone, the lodge will be condemned and David will use Catherine's money to buy the lodge at a bargain price. However, he must keep Ellard looking like a half-wit to keep from sharing the family inheritance; David tricks Ellard into bringing Catherine a carrot instead of a candle and leaves partially eaten apples around the house to make Ellard appear stupid.

Act I, scene ii

The following morning, Betty is trying to get the bumbling Ellard to bring sauerkraut up through the trap door from the cellar. Charlie talks to Froggy on the phone and tells him that something suspicious is going on with David and Owen. Betty is making breakfast for everyone and warns Ellard not to talk to Charlie, but Ellard becomes fascinated with the strange visitor and offers to teach Charlie some English.

Beginning to enjoy his little charade, Charlie encourages Betty's enthusiasm for entertaining a foreigner, making up silly dances and gestures for her to interpret. He also begins to sit with Catherine, listening to the bored, former debutante complain about her life. Charlie gradually falls in love with her. Ellard enters and impresses Catherine and Betty with the English he has "taught" Charlie. It is indeed "a day for surprises" as the presence of a "foreigner" has rejuvenated everyone, including Charlie himself.

Act II, scene i

Two days later, David and Owen examine materials salvaged from the burning of the Klan headquarters in Atlanta. As the two villains leave, Ellard and Charlie enter, continuing their English lessons. Catherine and Betty join the group, and Ellard relates how he and Charlie have been in Tilghman, watching the workers build the new courthouse, where Ellard is learning how to lay bricks. Froggie returns to check in on Charlie and is shocked to see that Charlie has not only continued to pretend that he is a foreigner but has prospered in the ruse.

As a lark, Froggie traps Charlie into telling a story in his foreign language, and Charlie, up to the challenge, creates a fairy-tale-like narrative that everyone seems to understand. Charlie becomes the center of everyone's attention, especially the adoring Catherine. Alone with Froggy, Charlie exults over his "adventure," thinking that he may be acquiring a "personality."

When Froggy leaves and Owen enters, Charlie discovers a way to intimidate the racist Owen, scaring him with mysterious threats that lead Owen to call Betty and David into the room. Now with an audience, Charlie also humiliates David, who is astounded when Catherine enters and announces that Ellard's success with bricklaying and teaching English to Charlie has led to her decision to share the family inheritance with her brother.

As Charlie teaches the group about his language and culture, David and Owen are made to look very stupid. Owen brandishes a knife, threatens everyone with Klan vengeance, and storms out. David follows to calm him, and the rest are left to worry about Owen's threats. Catherine is leaving a frantic message for Froggy on an answering machine just as Owen cuts the power to the lodge. All turn to Charlie for a plan.

Act II, scene ii

That evening, Charlie's plan for withstanding the Klan attack is in place, though no one is confident of its success. As the Klan marches up the hill toward the darkened lodge, Charlie rouses Betty, Catherine, and Ellard to their battle stations. Hooded and heavily armed men crash through the door, led by Owen, who confronts Betty and Charlie, announcing the vigilante justice of the Klan. The power to the house is restored and Klansmen are sent upstairs to find Catherine and Ellard. An armed Klansman comes down holding Catherine, who says that the others captured Ellard.

Owen orders Charlie to dance on a table, but Charlie assumes a menacing posture and threatens Owen instead. Pointing his finger at one of the Klansman, Charlie seems to make the hooded figure melt into the floor, leaving only the Klan robe behind. Owen and the other terrified Klansmen bolt from the lodge. The trick is then revealed. Upstairs, Ellard had knocked out a Klansman with a croquet mallet and put on his robe. Then, standing over the trap door to the cellar, Ellard was able to "disappear " on cue.

David enters from upstairs, holding his bruised head, and Catherine discovers her fiance's villainy. But as David is backing out the door, Froggy enters, verifies that David owns the van parked outside, and blows up the van with his detonating device. Catherine announces she is going to help Betty fix up the lodge and suggests that Ellard do the brickwork.

As they are saying goodbye to Charlie, Froggy presents his friend with a telegram that makes Charlie very sad. Catherine comforts Charlie and asks him to stay. Still in "character," Charlie agrees. Froggy reveals the news to Betty: the telegram did not announce that Charlie's wife had died but that she had run off with a proctologist.

Characters

Charlie Baker

Charlie Baker is the "foreigner" of the play's title, an Englishman in his late-forties who comes to Georgia for a weekend visit with his friend, Staff Sergeant Froggy LeSueur. Initially, Charlie is extremely shy, dull, and morose as he worries about the apparently imminent death of his philandering wife. A proofreader for an English science fiction magazine, Charlie considers himself "boring" and wonders what it would be like to have a vibrant personality. At the beginning of the play, Charlie is so sad and shy that he doesn't want to speak to anyone.

When Froggy introduces him as a "foreigner" who can't speak or understand English, however, Charlie gradually discovers his hidden potential. Overhearing the plot of the Reverend David and Owen Musser to buy Betty's lodge and turn it into a meeting place for the Ku Klux Klan, Charlie ultimately leads Betty, Catherine, and Ellard in a successful fight against these villains. In helping Betty thwart David and Owen's machinations, Charlie discovers leadership skills, love, and the vibrant personality he has always craved.

Reverend David Marshall Lee

The Reverend David Marshall Lee is the fiance of Catherine and one of the main villains, along with Owen, in the play. Pretending to be concerned about Betty and her struggling business, David secretly attempts to gain control of her lodge so he can turn it into the Tilghman County headquarters for the Ku Klux Klan. David appears to be friendly, sincere, genuinely decent, kind, and patient, and he is quite canny in carrying out his devious plot. In Act II, however, Charlie's clever taunts subtly reveal David's basic meanness.

Staff Sergeant Froggy LeSueur

Froggy is the ebullient demolition expert from the British Army who brings his friend, Charlie Baker, to Georgia for a three-day weekend. In his annual visits to the United States, Froggy has become good friends with Betty Meeks and is genuinely concerned about her welfare. When Charlie pleads for solitude during his brief stay, Froggy is caught between his loyalties to both Betty and Charlie; he hatches the plan to pass Charlie off as a "foreigner." Froggy's plan is for Betty to be charmed by the exotic visitor while Charlie gets his needed peace and quiet. In his late-forties, Froggy speaks in a Cockney dialect, is dressed in his army fatigues, and is extremely cheerful.

Betty Meeks

In her seventies and a widow, Betty Meeks is the owner and operator of the fishing lodge and resort in which the play takes place. Betty has always dreamed of traveling outside of Georgia and is quite thrilled with the prospect of having a "real, live foreigner" as her guest. Since the death of her husband, Betty has been struggling to keep her resort business alive, unaware of David and Owen's underhanded plot to gain control of it. Betty speaks with a strong Georgia accent. She talks to Charlie, "the foreigner," as if he were deaf, as if speaking louder and slower will facilitate Charlie's understanding.

Owen Musser

The racist Owen Musser is a local Georgia man who serves as the henchman for the main villain, the Reverend David Lee. After being named the property inspector for Tilghman County, Georgia, Owen has the authority to condemn Betty's fishing lodge as structurally unsafe, which would force Betty to sell and enable David Lee to purchase the lodge with the money he gains from marrying Catherine. To call Owen "crude" is to indulge in understatement: he is mean-spirited, ignorant, volatile, and extremely prejudiced against anyone who doesn't fit his ideal of "Christian, white America."

Catherine Simms

Catherine is staying with Betty at the lodge. She is engaged to the Reverend David Lee, unaware of his true, villainous character. A former debutante and the heiress of a huge fortune, Catherine is bored with life, restless, and unsure of what she wants. When she discovers in Charlie a man who is genuinely kind and really enjoys listening, she believes she has found her ideal romantic mate. Catherine is small in stature and pretty.

Ellard Simms

Ellard is Catherine's younger brother and an extremely insecure young man who is considered by others to be mentally defective. Shue describes him as "a lumpy, overgrown, backward youth, who spends much of his time kneading something tiny and invisible in front of his chest." Catherine has promised to give Ellard half of their very large inheritance if he shows any signs of mental and social competence. The villainous Reverend David Lee conspires to make Ellard appear stupid in order to maintain control over all of Catherine's money, but during the course of the play Ellard proves to have both moderate intelligence and considerable courage.

Themes

Search for Self

Though Shue's main interest in *The Foreigner* is to make his audience laugh, he is also concerned with the theme of self-awareness. Charlie, Ellard,Betty, and Catherine struggle to discover who they really are while David and Owen attempt to hide their real identities from both others and themselves. Only one character, Froggy, is quite comfortable with his sense of self.

Charlie is the most obvious example of the struggle to achieve self-awareness. Convinced at the beginning of the play that he is boring and dull, Charlie discovers not only that he has an interesting personality but that he is worthy of a woman's love. Like many insecure people, Charlie has permitted others to define the way he sees himself. His seemingly lowly proofreader's job doesn't appear exciting or even necessary by the world's standards "I sometimes wonder whether a science-fiction magazine even needs a proofreader."

It is Charlie's familiarity with science fiction, however, that enables him to so cleverly intimidate Owen and pull off the disappearing act that frightens off the Klan in the play's climax. In the opening scene Froggy had said "you would've faced enemy fire with the best if you'd 'ad to," and it is indeed a kind of enemy fire that Charlie faces when David and Owen threaten him and his new friends. Uncharacteristically competent, calm, clever, inventive, and brave, Charlie finds a sense of self by the end of the play and earns the love of Catherine.

By way of contrast, Froggy has a strong sense of self and never questions who he is (though he is far less of a presence in the play than Charlie). Ever the competent military operative, Froggy is confident, positive, and unflappable, even when surprised. He promises that he will solve the problem with Charlie's shyness, even when he has no idea how to do so. When his plan doesn't turn out the way he anticipated, Froggy adjusts. Characteristically, he works fearlessly with explosives"one less mountain to worry about." But when David first meets Froggy and addresses him as "sir," the honest Froggie says, "Don't call me sir. I ain't no bloody officer."

Like Charlie, Ellard has serious identity problems. Considered by everyone around him to be a "half-wit," Ellard has come to play the role that others have given him. For the purposes of comedy, Ellard is genuinely slow, but the play suggests that Ellard also has significant human qualities. For example, in the breakfast scene, as he first attempts to "teach" Charlie English, Ellard embodies both his habitual self-doubt and his genuinely indomitable nature "But your forkman, I wish somebody else'd help you with this, 'cause I don't know anything, butI think that your forkyour fork'd be the main thing you'd use."

Betty is another who sees herself in a diminished way. Since her husband's death, Betty doesn' t think of herself as being very capable, and she is all too ready to capitulate to her economic problems. But when she meets Charlie, Betty begins a process of rejuvenation that carries throughout the play. When Charlie says "thank you" to a cup of tea at their first meeting, Betty confidently assumes that she enabled him to learn his first words of English. And when Charlie tells his fractured fairy tale, Betty is convinced that she "understood practically all of it." Hauling out her harmonica after thirty years, Betty rediscovers her vitality in Charlie's presence "he makes me feel twenty years younger" she tells Froggy; "You done saved my life when you brung him here."

Catherine is an heiress whose former debutante identity can no longer define her. Filled with self-hatred, Catherine is humiliated by her pregnancy.She will not walk "down that aisle all ballooned up as big as a house in front of all my people" because her premarital pregnancy doesn't fit the image that was created for her by her wealthy parents. Her identity crisis is so severe she thinks "I'm just goin' nuts, I guess ... I'm probably just ready for the funny farm." By the end of the play, however, she discovers a new self and decisively chooses Charlie as a mate and father for her child.

David and Owen fit in with the theme somewhat differently. Both have been assuming false identifies for so long that they have lost touch with any real sense of self. When David's villainy is finally discovered, Catherine demands to know why David hadn't been honest with her. The stammering reverend finally comes up with, "I wanted it to be a surprise!" The line is funny but also poignant as it reveals someone who has had all of his persona stripped away, leaving nothing but an idiotic non-sequitur as a response.

Finally, Owen serves as a contrast to Ellard; Owen is genuinely stupid but thinks of himself as intelligent. When he takes the title of Tilghman County property inspector, Owen puffs up and begins to think of himself as a worthy candidate for sheriff. But this is the same man who sees supernatural forces in lightning storms "They'uz a man melted out thar in them hills oncet.. . . Now, that's true. They's things out thar." Hilarious as Owen's stupidity is, it is also an important element in the thematic issue of self-awareness.

Prejudice and Tolerance

Another theme that stands out in *The Foreigner* is the importance of tolerance; David and Owen illustrate most clearly Shue's distaste for prejudice. When Owen first meets Charlie, the concept of "foreigner" is enough to turn Owen into a hilariously ludicrous bigot "well we don't get s'many o' your kind these parts. (Rubs his chin.) Why last time I saw a foreigner, he was wrigglin' on the end o' my bayonet." Owen wants to exterminate anyone who doesn't resemble "his" kind "gonna wipe you all right out all you dummy boys, black boys, Jew boys. We gonna clean up this whole country, by and by." And David, though a little more subtle, is similarly intolerant of anyone who doesn't resemble him. He has set out to create "a new nation ... a Christian, white nation . . . the most powerful Christian force on earth" that "could have made this country clean again!

Wiped this nation clean of□(Looking at Charlie) people like him!... Foreigner! Jews! Catholics!"

But the theme of tolerance is also expressed through Betty, who is on the one hand a little impatient with Ellard and on the other comically sensitive to the feelings of the "foreign" Charlie. In the breakfast scene, Betty warns Ellard to "behave" himself and "pay Charlie no mind." When she reenters and finds the two with juice glasses on their heads, Betty scolds Ellard but encourages Charlie to put his glass back on his head, immediately assuming that the behavior is part of Charlie's foreign culture.

She lectures Ellard on tolerance for diversity and encourages Charlie to continue what he is doing, strange as it might seem to her□ "if Charlie wants to put a glass on his head, that's fine ... that means that's what they do in his country, at breakfast time. Evidently they all put glasses on their heads. But don't let me catch you doin' it too; that looks like you're makin' fun of him. You hear?" The situation is richly comic because Betty is so thoroughly confused in her generosity. At the same time, Shue is reinforcing his thematic assertion that human beings must tolerate and even celebrate individual differences if the world is to survive.

Style

Situation

Very often a comedy will succeed because it starts with an inherently funny situation. Take for instance two very close friends being thrown together as roommates and discovering they can't live with one another because one is obsessively neat and the other is habitually messy. This is the situation in Neil Simon's, *The Odd Couple,* one of his most successful stage comedies. Simon's characters, Felix and Oscar, repeated their roles in both a movie and a long-running television sitcom and then spawned a female version of the play where all the genders of the characters were reversed.

Much of the enduring success of Simon's creation is due to the humor inherent to the initial comic situation. In fact, Simon sold the movie rights to *The Odd Couple*, even before he had written the play itself, on the basis of a thirty-two word sentence that simply described the "situation."

On television, "situation comedies" or "sitcoms" dominate the comic fare, and they too get their initial power from their situational concepts. For example, a visitor from outer space joins an earthly family and the *Mork and Mindy* series (1978-1982) starring Robin Williams is born. In 1972, with the United States seriously conflicted over Vietnam, a comically disparate group of battlefield surgeons in the Korean War populate the long-running M*A*S*H television series (1972-1983). Film director Blake Edwards created the bumbling French police inspector Jacques Clouseau and the popular "Pink Panther" series of films ran for three decades.

Shue's situational concept starts with a middle-aged and unusually shy British man who is whisked off for a relaxing weekend to the rural South of the United States, where he yearns to be left alone, is passed off as a foreigner, and overhears a plot against the basically good people who serve as his hosts. When he takes advantage of his assumed role and helps save these people from the villains of the story, this man discovers a deeper identity that leads to a much happier and more productive life.

But because Shue was a gifted comic writer, this initial situation breeds equally inspired situations within the framework of the play. For example, at the breakfast table in Act I, scene ii, the shy "foreigner" encounters a "slow" and decidedly southern young man who tries to teach him English, southern style "can□you□say□"fork"? (Holds up his fork)... two parts. "Faw-werk." Later, the "foreigner" is trapped by his friend, Froggy, into telling a story in his supposedly native language, and, thinking very quickly, the foreigner makes up a hilariously fractured fairy tale, complete with wildly acted out gestures "(Imitating with his right hand a huge, slovenly beast crashing through the forest) 'Broizhni, broizhni! Broizhni, broizhni!' Y byootsky dottsky? Hai. (Skipping in a semi-circle with his left hand.)"

Then, when given an opportunity to secretly confront the villains of the story, this same shy man, who thinks of himself as being "dull," brilliantly humiliates the villains while maintaining his pose as an innocent "foreigner:" "'Please calm down.' That's what he was saying, Owen. Not 'Bees come down.' I think that's good advice, too. (Owen watches Charlie like a serpent.)." Much of the hilarity of Shue's comedy comes from clever dialogue but the driving power of the play's fun comes from ingeniously conceived comic situations.

Characterization

The wildly comic situations in *The Foreigner* work well because they are complemented by surprisingly interesting characterization. Shue's characters are not complex or profound, but they are far from the flat stereotypes that they initially appear to be. Jay Joslyn, in an essay from the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, said of Shue: even "his villains are not stickmen. They are well observed, a subtle mixture of weakness and hatefulness." The villains and heroes would likely be the most melodramatic of the play's characters, but the characterization of Owen serves as a striking example of Shue's more complex comic skill.

That Owen is hateful in his melodramatic way is quite clear. When he first meets the "foreign" Charlie he absurdly mistakes him for a Vietnamese and taunts him with "Well□we don't get s' many o' your kind in these parts. (Rubs his chin.) Why□ last time I saw a foreigner, he was wrigglin' on the end o' my bayonet." Asking "whar's your mother,?" Owen opines that she's probably dead and that "they's probably not enough of 'er left to spread on toast." Much of the comedy comes from the absurd exaggeration of Owen's venom, but the comedy is heightened because the audience has also perceived how pathetically stupid and vulnerable Owen is. When he makes his first entrance at Betty's he appears out of the pouring rain and says "Hey, Bet. Nice weather fer eels." The substitution in the cliched phrase of "eels" for the more conventional "ducks" is funny but also chilling. Eels would be creatures Owen would enjoy handling. He is, himself, eel-like. But then, when Betty asks, "Owen, what're you doin' in here," Owen responds in a comically literal way, focusing on the prepositional phrase, "in here," and says, "It 'uz rainin' outside."

Owen is genuinely menacing and frightening, but he is at the same time comically superstitious, literal minded, and potentially incompetent. Any situation he is put in, like the final scene where he and his klansmen terrorize Betty and her guests, is a situation with rich comic possibilities because of the complexity in his characterization.

Historical Context

The Legacy of Vietnam

The villainous Owen Musser appears to have fought in the Vietnam War because when he first meets Charlie he taunts him by saying, "why□last time I saw a foreigner, he was wrigglin' on the end o' my bayonet." Then, asking where Charlie's mother is, Owen says, "where's she at now? Down under ground, someplace? Some foreign graveyard the hell off someplace, pushin' up□palm trees, 'er sump'm?" The slow-witted Owen probably jumps to this conclusion because "charlie" was a euphemism for the enemy Viet Cong soldiers in the conflict.

It can be assumed that Vietnam was on Shue's mind throughout his brief playwrighting career. He served in the army at the height of the Vietnam conflict, though he never fought overseas. In *Grandma Duck Is Dead,* his first play for Milwaukee Rep, a group of college students in June of 1968 are concerned with avoiding the military draft. In his production notes for the play, Shue suggests that an anti-Vietnam war song used in the Milwaukee Rep production was highly appropriate. In T*he Nerd* the character Willum is a Vietnam veteran who opens his home to a man who saved his life on a Vietnam battlefield. And finally, in *Wenceslas Square,* Dooley, drafted and in the army during the Vietnam years, expresses very negative feelings about army life. One of Shue's thematic concerns in *The Foreigner* is prejudicial thinking, a distinctive part of the American Vietnam experience, and Owen's Vietnam duty has certainly fed the building inspector's preconceptions regarding "foreigners."

In 1983, the debacle of Vietnam was still a sensitive issue in America, even though nearly a decade had passed since the United States had accepted virtual defeat and withdrawn its last troops from Vietnam. Vietnam has been so traumatic an episode in American history, however, that its ghost rises even today whenever the United States is involved in foreign hostilities; in 1983 it had risen again because of American military involvement in Central America.

In March, 1983, President Ronald Reagan attempted to persuade Congress to approve $60 million in military aid to the democratic El Salvadorean government, and the news media was quick to draw parallels with the Vietnam disaster. As *Newsweek* reported in March, "Ronald Reagan, for one, raised the specter of Vietnam. 'There is no parallel whatsoever with Vietnam,' he said soothingly; then he went on to suggest that El Salvador is a bigger threat to U.S. security than Vietnam ever was." Reagan argued that El Salvadorean and Nicaraguan rebels supported by Cuba and the Soviet Union had to be stopped before the cliched domino effect jeopardized the entire region, sweeping the entire world into communism. The debate escalated throughout the year but because of the legacy of Vietnam there was no uniform enthusiasm for military intervention in Central America.

The Ku Klux Klan

For nearly 150 years, the racially supremacist agenda of the Ku Klux Klan has waxed and waned in America. In the early-1980s Klan membership had experienced another resurgence, according to an organization called Klanwatch that was created in 1981 in response to that new growth spurt. In *The Dragon and the Cross: The Rise and Fall of the Ku Klux Klan in Middle America*, Richard Tucker quoted Klanwatch figures that number Klan membership in 1981 at "an estimated eleven thousand." This membership statistic was up from a low of "about fifteen hundred in 1974." In 1965 membership "had climbed to forty-two-thousand at the height of the civil rights battles," and at one point in the nation's history there were millions of Klan members.

Founded in Tennessee in the 1860s as an innocent social club, the Klan soon shifted to a racist agenda in response to southern disaffection over the politics of post-Civil War Reconstruction. But after a period of rapid growth, the Klan's excesses led to governmental sanctions and a decline in its numbers until the major revival of the Klan after World War I. The heyday of the organization lasted from 1915 to the mid-1920s, when somewhere between three and five million Americans throughout the United States claimed membership. This version of the Klan focused first on Catholics, then on Jews and Blacks, as undesirable groups. The Klan's moralistic, white, Anglo-saxon, protestant prejudice considered these groups "foreign," not "100% American." But the Klan' s negative publicity in the 1920s eventually caused another precipitous decline in participation and by 1930 there were only a few hundred thousand members, mostly located in the South.

Where racism persists, however, the Klan keeps at least a foothold, and the 1950s and 1960s saw another resurgence, this time smaller, less pervasive yet more violent than its historic predecessors. This "new" Klan was more focused in the South and, responding to the Civil Rights movement, was more targeted on blacks. As Tucker reported, "from 1956 to 1966, there were more than one thousand documented cases of racist terrorism, assaults, and murders committed by Klansmen and their allies."

Tucker reported that by 1988, Klan membership "had dropped again to about five thousand," but in the same year David Duke, a former "Grand Dragon" (or high level leader) of the Klan, was elected to the Louisiana state legislature, running openly as a racist and former Klansman. He lost when he ran for the United States Senate two years later but, as Tucker attested, "he managed to get 44 percent of the total vote and 60 percent of the white vote." In 1983, Larry Shue could ridicule the Klan and make the audience laugh at its silliness, but the humor was and continues to be powerful because the insupportable Klan idea refuses to die.

Critical Overview

The initial production of *The Foreigner* at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre (Milwaukee, Wisconsin) on January 13, 1983, was a huge success. The local audience was familiar with Shue's work, and this new play did not disappoint them.

When the play moved to the Astor Place Theatre, an Off-Broadway venue in New York City, on November 1, 1984, the production was directed by Jerry Zaks, and Shue himself played the role of "Froggy" LeSueur, with Anthony Heald as Charlie Baker. Heald was widely acclaimed in the title role, even by critics who disliked the play. Later in the run, when Heald took a leave of absence, Shue himself played the role of Charlie.

In a series of "preview" performances before the official opening night, New York audiences found the play as hilarious as their Wisconsin counterparts. And one evening, after the show officially opened, the boiler in the basement of the theatre burst, sending the audience outside into a freezing rain, though the playgoers refused to leave until the boiler problem was temporarily rectified and they had a chance to see the second act. The overwhelmingly positive audience response to *The Foreigne*r led the show's producers to make plans to transfer the production to a Broadway theatre.

But then the critics came to review the show; reviews were less than kind. In the words of Samuel G. Freedman in a *New York Times* article entitled, "A Play Survives against the Odds," the critic found the plot "preposterous even for a farce." Though they recognized that the play generated tremendous laughter, the critics distrusted the audience response and considered the play shallow. Writing for the *New York Daily News*, Douglas Watt called *The Foreigner* "an unpalatable hash." He found the play's situations and plot contrivances arbitrary and strained, its characters stereotypical and cliched. He grudgingly admitted that "though his story is ridiculous, Shue does get off a few funny lines."

The highly influential Frank Rich, writing for the *New York Times,* called Shue's play "labored " with a "preposterous plot" based on an "incredible premise," altogether an "inane recipe." And John Simon wrote in *New York* that Shue's play was "unintelligent trash" based on "utter implausibility." Clive Barnes of the *New York Post* was a little more kind, finding the play only "somewhat flawed, and poised curiously in the disputed territory between comedy and farce." Barnes called the central premise of the play "alien corn," and he considered the play itself "an only sporadically hilarious tale of unlikely shenanigans." John Beaufort of the *Christian Science Monitor* dismissed the play with only the mild rebuke that "accepting Charlie's adventures, even at their farcical value, demands more than a willing suspension of disbelief."

Not surprisingly, this critical response in the media hurt attendance of *The Foreigner* and a week after the official opening of the play its success was further complicated when the actress playing Betty died and had to be replaced. After the euphoria of the previews, the producers now had to consider closing the show and taking a financial loss. As Freedman recalled, "business, which had been solid during previews,

immediately plummeted. In its first full week, the show grossed $9,881, well below its break-even point of $23,000. The show's cash reserve went to cover losses. A closing notice was posted backstage."

However, the company members believed in the play and took pay cuts, distributed flyers in Times Square, and met with theatre groups to revive the word of mouth the previews had initially created. Over 80,000 lapel buttons were made to advertise the show, and *The Foreigner* was finally saved by a Texas oil millionaire who saw the play, found it hilarious, and invested $60,000 in the production until the word of mouth could generate another steady audience for it. Eventually, all of these measures succeeded, the audiences returned in large numbers, and the play enjoyed an unusually long Off-Broadway run. *The Foreigner* was eventually awarded an Outer Critics Circle Award for best Off-Broadway play and productions began sprouting up all over the country. Also named one of the best plays in the regional theatre repertoire by the American Theatre Critics Association, the play even attracted the Disney empire, which bought the film rights and hired Shue to write the script.

When Shue's plane crashed, ending his personal dreams for a long playwrighting career, *The Foreigner* was a solid commercial success. Well over a decade later, the play still generates numerous high school, community, university, and regional theatre productions each year. Reviewing a 1999 community theatre production in Salt Lake City, Utah, Claudia Harris declared that *The Foreigner* "is a staple of regional and community theatre that has not worn out its welcome." The capacity of *The Foreigner* to rouse tremendous laughter has not diminished with the passage of time.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Nienhuis is a Ph.D. specializing in modern and contemporary drama. In this essay he discusses the levels of comedic skill that Shue displays in The Foreigner.

There is no question that Larry Shue was capable of making audiences laugh. Fellow playwright and actor Amlin Gray reported in *A Book of Tributes* that "one night in 1981, during the paper bag scene [in The Nerd], a man in the audience fell out of his seat, holding his sides against the laughter that he couldn't stop, and rolled down three steps before he could recover." Richard O'Donnell, a regional actor who had performed in both *The Nerd and The Foreigner,* reported in *A Book of Tributes* that "the people who came to see *The Nerd* laughed so hard that at times we [the actors on stage] broke the fourth wall and laughed out loud with them." Even in Berlin, Germany, where the title of Shue's *The Nerd* was translated into "Louse in a Fur Coat" (a proverbial constant irritant) Shue's comedy left the audience "shrieking with laughter," according to a review quoted in *A Book of Tributes*. In a *Washington Post* eulogy for the playwright, David Richards quoted John Dillon, artistic director of the Milwaukee Repertory Company during Shue's tenure there, as simply saying, "his plays were always laugh machines."

Even Shue's critics had to admit that they were tickled by his work. In her *New Yorker* review of *The Foreigner* Edith Oliver was clearly lukewarm in her response to the play. She found it "funny" but also "silly." She asserted that the audience must take the premise of the play and "gulp it down." However, she concluded with the statement, "I have no critical comment to make, unless expressing enjoyment can be considered criticism. I laughed start to finish at one comic surprise after another." Three years later, while reviewing *The Nerd,* Oliver would admit that "the laughter, and not only my own [was] practically unceasing."

Though belly laughs are often seen by the general public as the very definition of great comedy, critics tend to consider uncontrollable laughter as a sign of an unsophisticated and unreflective response to a non-literary event. More cerebral twentieth century models for stage comedy would include Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov (*Uncle Vanya*), whose brilliant plays consistently straddle the line between the comic and serious, tending to elicit smiles rather than guffaws. Contemporary American playwright Neil Simon is the most commercially successful playwright of all time, but in the decades since his 1961 Broadway debut Simon has still not been able to convince critics that he is a "serious" comic dramatist. At the time of his death in 1985, Larry Shue's unquestionable skill at creating uproarious laughter had already begun to pigeonhole him as a Neil Simon-like comic playwright□one capable of eliciting laughter but not of provoking serious thought.

To some extent, of course, very intense laughter from a theatrical audience can elicit a begrudging admission that something magical might be taking place on stage. In April of 1985, a critic for *People Weekly* wrote, "if you want the final word on *The Foreigner,* a wild farce by newcomer Larry Shue, listen to the audience packed into New York's Astor Place Theatre. From start to finish the crowd yelps like hyenas." And Shue himself,

quoted in the same essay, gave testimony to the redemptive potential in raucous laughter: "You have tired, neurotic people filing in," he stated, "and you have kids coming out□giggling and flirting."

The main trigger for belly laughs in the plays of Neil Simon or in many television sitcoms is the "one-liner," a piece of dialogue that surprises the audience with an unexpected twist. For example, in Simon's *The Odd Couple*, the poker players, after taking notice of Oscar's broken refrigerator, ask the difference between the brown and green sandwiches that Oscar is serving. He says of the green, "it's either very new cheese or very old meat."

Shue's comedy is similarly fueled by scintillating one-liners. For example, in the first scene of *The Foreigner*, Froggy attempts to minimize the seriousness of Charlie's wife "makin' eyes at some bloke." Froggy asks "where was it?" and Charlie answers, "the shower." Froggy's gentle questioning and the phrase, "making eyes," suggests a certain timidity in Charlie's wife, perhaps even some innocence (what kind of woman would marry a man like Charlie, after all?). The audience is led to expect that the worst-case scenario is probably a casual flirtation. However, with the image of rampant sexuality that follows, the audience has their expectations violently overturned and the result is raucous laughter.

Then, when Froggy discovers that Mary's indiscretions were more than "one little dalliance," he asks "'ow [how] many, then?," and Charlie answers, "twenty-three." This very large number places the infidelity in another category altogether. When Froggy expresses his disbelief, Charlie says, "quite true. Actors, writers. All the glamorous professions, you see. Criminals.... Veterinarians." In this list of "glamorous professions" the word "veterinarians" jumps out as a particularly incongruous example and shocks the audience into yet another belly laugh.

But Shue's comedy is not sustained merely by expert one-liners. Underneath nearly all the huge laughs is a genuine interest in what it means to be human. Take, for example, the wonderfully funny "breakfast scene" where Ellard has been directed by Betty to take no notice of Charlie. Ellard's intense curiosity gets the best of him, however. As Shue comments in the stage directions, "Ellard's idea of paying Charlie no mind is to stare at him as though he were a unicorn." In the outrageously funny events that follow, it is easy to lose sight of the very powerful human dynamic at work in this scene.

Ellard's spirit has been beaten down by years of low expectations, but he still cannot resist investigating this curious phenomenon in front of him. And Charlie, who has been similarly underestimated his whole life, has come to breakfast hoping to be left alone yet initiates the contact with Ellard. Charlie begins by smiling, perhaps out of nervousness, but the stage directions then specify that Charlie "picks up his fork, examines it, [and] frowns. He looks at Ellard, questioning." This is the trigger for the entire breakfast scene, indeed for the play itself, and it is certainly not an idle gesture on Charlie's part nor is it an arbitrary one in Shue's dramaturgy. Does Charlie react to Ellard out of a genuine desire to create human contact? Or does he engages Ellard out of puckish love of play? Whatever Charlie's motive, he belies in this gesture the self-denigrating

appraisal that he is "boring," just as Ellard will belie to some extent the charge that he is "stupid."

Shue's stage directions go on to specify that "Ellard looks back [to Charlie], almost responds, but decides not to. Can this stranger really not know what a fork is? No□better to mind one's own business." If Shue were merely interested in setting up and stringing together one-liners, this kind of sensitive writing would never appear in the play. Ellard tries to ignore Charlie, as he has been ordered to but it is impossible. Charlie begins imitating Ellard's actions and soon the two are engaged in a mirror image of one another, a classic comic bit that comes alive in this scene because Shue is ultimately sensitive to the human psychology that lies beneath the laughter.

In a similar fashion, Shue creates a significant subtext for the scene in which Charlie humiliates the villainous Owen Musser. By this time in the play, the audience has clearly chosen sides. Owen is a creep and Charlie has become heroically clever□ the farthest thing from a "boring" person. Charlie has begun to feel a sense of his own potential and just before Owen reenters, Charlie, alone with Froggy, realizes how easy his new sense of wit has become for him. Having survived Froggy's challenge to tell a funny story, Charlie realizes that he might have "an idea" about how to save Betty and her friends from Owen and David. When Froggy leaves with the line, "I feel a bit like Doctor Frankenstein," Charlie begins "pacing furiously," saying to himself, "Frankenstein. Yes."

The resulting scene with Owen is very funny because Owen thinks he is in control when it is the brilliant but subtle Charlie who is in the driver's seat. After Owen blasts Charlie with racist threats, Shue specifies that there be a pause before Charlie says, "brightly," "Are you happy?" This apparent non-sequitur has all the force of a one-liner but its real power comes from the complexity of the dramatic moment. Charlie is setting up Owen's destruction and the fullness of Charlie's counterattack comes as a total surprise to the audience. Aware of Owen's superstitious nature, Charlie will confound him with words just vague enough to seem capricious but so appropriately threatening in their mysterious way that the audience can revel in Owen's intimidation and at the same time glory in Charlie's discovery of personal power.

When Owen dismisses Charlie's words as "jabberin'," Charlie shifts gears: "Hello! Goodbye! One-two-three. (Owen snorts, looks away. Pause. Different tone.) I loook tru your bones.... Yes. Me see. Moon get beeg. You sleep□sleep out, out. All you skin□bye-bye. I come. I look tru your bones.... Gonna look into your bones, when de bees come down." The humor here is based not merely on a shallow reversal of expectations but on a sense of justice and a celebration of human capabilities. Charlie has entered the play as an apparently incompetent human being, but he has since discovered powers he never knew he had. The audience laughs uproariously, in part because the comic villain has gotten his comeuppance, in part because the human potential for personal growth has been reaffirmed. Shue should not be confused with Shakespeare or Chekhov, but there is in this scene and many others in *The Foreigner* a dramatic texture that the belly laughs can often obscure.

In Laurie Winer's 1988 article in the New York Times, director Jerry Zaks recalled that he "had never heard of Larry Shue" when producer Jack McQuiggan sent him a copy of *The Foreigner* in 1984. "I was completely knocked out by the effortlessness of the comic writing," he stated. "It was one of those special plays where you can't wait to see where it's going, and you can't believe that it's as funny as it is." The laughs, said Zaks, "invariably come out of situation and characters, and always in a wonderfully surprising way ... when people walked out of that theatre they were dizzy. Every night, two or three hundred people went crazy in the basement of this building, and I remember thinking that if a visitor from another planet came and saw this, it would think something very powerful had been going on."

In his final tribute to his friend, Gray said that Shue "used conventional structures as springboards, and he used them very skilfully. But sometimes all the underpinnings would just drop away and there would be a passage like the paper bag scene in *The Nerd* or the breakfast scene in *The Foreigner* that lifted off into a sublime celebration of how silly and how lovely it is to be human. Now that Larry's gone, nobody else will write these scenes, because nobody else knows how." And Rose Pickering, an actress in the Milwaukee Repertory Company, perhaps summed Shue up the best: "he leaves behind a legacy in his plays, a legacy of laughter and gentle humanity that reassures all us misfits that we can fit in somewhere."

Source: Terry R. Nienhuis, for *Drama forStudents*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Oliver praises the production of The Foreigner, *yet questions the plot's overall implausibility*.

James Agee classified certain movies as "intelligent trash," a category that he neither respected nor condemned, but recognized as having its uses. At a posh London party, Sarah Bernhardt was so overcome by all that staid propriety that she whispered to a French acquaintance, "Allons nous encanailler!" ("Let's go make pigs of ourselves!") In the theater, too, there is room for some slumming, which, I imagine, is what Larry Shue's *The Foreigner* means to provide. After seeing this farce by the actor-playwright, I suspect that he is quite capable of writing intelligent trash for well-bred pigs to wallow in, as the play does, at times, rise to this level. Mostly, however; it is content to be unintelligent trash.

The Foreigner brings an unlikely pair of Englishmen□"Froggy" LeSueur, a boisterous corporal and demolition expert, and Charlie Baker, a timid, boring reserve officer, whose wife may be dying and is certainly cuckolding him, to Betty Meeker's Fishing Lodge Resort in Tilghman County, the heart of Georgia darkness. Here the smooth Reverend David Marshall Lee and his rough pal, Owen Musser, are planning to take over, with the help of the Klan, today the lodge, tomorrow America. David is about to marry the pretty but somewhat benighted ex-debutante and heiress Catherine Simms, who has a semi-idiot brother, Ellard, and a fortune with which David and Owen plan to finance the takeover of what they propose to turn into White America. Because of his extreme shyness, which makes talking to strangers agonizing, Charlie is passed off as a foreigner having no English while Froggy goes off on some demolition job. Betty, the aging proprietress, the exploited and dimly suspicious postdeb, and the rather speculative half-wit are enormously taken with the cute "foreigner," who, in turn, takes to being fussed over as any lamb would to being lionized.

Now, what prevents this farce□in which, typically, bumbling good overcomes cunning but fallible evil□from being intelligent trash is its utter implausibility. What makes good farce a valid art form is its keeping a firm grip on reality no matter how much its feet may slip on banana peels. In *The Foreigner*, however, people are stupid and inept beyond any relation to reality, except when they become, equally unbelievably, improbably clever or wise. And the author cannot even make his premise seem credible enough to support the airiest of fantasies. Furthermore, his wit, despite occasional flashes, goes into lengthy eclipses during which we seem to be viewing the proceedings through smoky glass. Take this line of Catherine's to her brother: "You couldn't catch a chipmunk if all his legs were broken and if he were glued to the palm of your hand." This kind of line is trying too hard. Not feeling confident that it has scored with the broken legs, it huffs on to that sticky hand in the hope of clinching a laugh, and doesn't get it in either place. Ellard replies, "I wouldn't want him then," which in its pseudologic is mildly amusing; but because the big yocks have failed to come, the answer makes us conjure up in all seriousness a broken-legged beastie, and the fun turns sour.

One main source of humor in the play is the language of the nonexistent country from which Charlie claims to hail. In this double-talk, he improvises everything from badinage to lengthy anecdotes, and Froggy must fall in with it, however clumsily. The word for "yes," Charlie tells us, is ' *'gok,'* ' and the word for "no" is *"blint"*; otherwise, the lingo sounds mostly like pig Russian, and less funny than it could be. Rather more amusing is the rapid progress Charlie makes in English□as are also his recidivisms whenever it pays to act dumb□ and the status of genius this confers upon him. Here the comedy is nicely abetted by a lovably ludicrous performance from Anthony Heald, who has a fine talent (as demonstrated also in *Quartermaine's Terms*) for turning nerds into richly textured specimens insofar as this is humanly possible. That the author makes him, as he also does Ellard, in some ways too smart is not the actor's fault.

There is good work from the entire cast, which includes Sudie Bond (who had trouble with her lines), Patricia Kalember (a perfectly befogged yet sunny southern belle), Robert Schenkkan (a whited supremacist sepulcher), Kevin Geer (a nitwit quite witty in the nitty-gritty), Christopher Curry (a redneck sweaty under the collar), and the author, Larry Shue (whose Froggy is an unusually convincing portrait of a lower-class Englishman by an American actor). Karen Schulz's set, though quite adequate, bears a spine-tingling resemblance to that of *Moose Murders,* thus arousing expectations that no play, perhaps, can fulfill. Rita Ryack's costumes and Paul Gallo's lighting are highly professional, and Jerry Zaks, himself a funny actor, has directed for easygoing drollery rather than frantic farce, which would have been right had the material met him halfway. In short: the production, *gok*; the play, *blint*.

Source: Edith Oliver, review of *The Foreigner* in the *New Yorker,* Vol. 60, November 19, 1984, pp. 187-88.

Critical Essay #3

While finding that Shue's play has many humorous moments, Simon ultimately finds The Foreigner *short on actual story. The critic offers high praise for the production, however, citing the skills of the actors in particular*.

"The Foreigner," by (and with) Larry Shue, at Astor Place, is a silly, funny farce, for Shue has a truly humorous and jokey mind and the knack of turning a phrase. A British Army officer, a demolitions expert, comes to an inn in Georgia on some assignment or other, bringing with him a friend called Charlie, whom he must leave there from time to time. Charlie, a shy man, is overcome by panic at the thought of having to make conversation with strangers, so, to protect him, the officer tells the proprietress of the inn that Charlie is a foreigner unable to understand English, much less speak it. That is the premise (and basic joke) of the play, and what you do is place it on the tip of your tongue and gulp it down. Just when Charlie, alone, has decided to confess to the hoax, a sinister, two-faced minister enters, and down the stairs rushes his pretty fiancée to announce that she is pregnant. Loud, intimate conversation follows, and suddenly she notices Charlie, head in hands, and raises hell. Proprietress reassures her that Charlie can understand nothing. In the course of the action, Charlie overhears quite a lot□there is villainy and skulduggery afoot, but the villains take no notice of him whatever. Since surprise is the essence of farce, you'll get no more from me, except that at the end the villains are thwarted, the Ku Klux Klan is turned back, and everybody good lives happily ever after.

I have no critical comment to make, unless expressing enjoyment can be considered criticism. I laughed start to finish at one comic surprise after another. Anthony Heald, that fine young actor, appeared to be having the time of his life as Charlie, and so did the late, adorable Sudie Bondas the credulous, rapt proprietress, Kevin Geer as a dim-witted handyman, Robert Schenkkan as the shifty clergyman, Patricia Kalamber as the fiancée, and Mr. Shue as the British Army officer. Jerry Zaks was the quick-witted director.

Source: John Simon, "If the Shue Doesn't Fit" in *New York,* Vol. 17, November 12, 1984, pp. 135-36.

Topics for Further Study

Many critics of *The Foreigner* imply that the play has only "commercial" appeal, that it is not much different from the typical television sitcom. Compare Shue's play with one or more of your favorite television sitcoms and argue for or against this assertion.

Some critics of *The Foreigner* claim that the play reduces southerners to "politically incorrect" stereotypes. Investigate the way southerners are portrayed in both serious literature and in popular entertainment, comparing these treatments with Shue' s portrayal of Betty, Catherine, Ellard, David Lee, and Owen.

Research the history of the Ku Klux Klan in America and describe in detail the status and activity of the Klan in America in the early-1980s.

Klanwatch, a branch of the Southern Poverty Law Center, has monitored Klan and other hate group activity since 1981. By the late-1990s, Klanwatch was aware of over 400 racist and neo-Nazi hate groups in America as well as 500 "militia" groups. Research this explosion of hate-group activities in America in the latter half of the twentieth century and discuss whether a comedy like *The Foreigner* can hope to ameliorate such a social problem.

Research the psychological condition of shyness, bashfulness, or timidity. What causes it in real life? How does overcoming real-life shyness compare with Charlie's triumph over shyness in *The Foreigner*?

Compare and Contrast

1983: In April, Chicago elects its first black mayor, Harold Washington, in a very close race following a bitter campaign that frequently referred openly to the racial issue. Weeks before the election, incumbent Mayor Jane Byrne, a white female, announces herself as a write-in candidate, intensifying the racial overtones of the campaign.

Today: The country has considered a black candidate for the office of President of the United States. Public opinion polls in 1995 revealed that retired General Colin Powell, had he agreed to run, would have received widespread support as the first black candidate for President.

1983: In October, the United States Senate votes 78 to 22 to create an annual federal holiday to commemorate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., the slain black civil rights leader of the 1950s and 60s. Opposition to the motion is led by North Carolina senator Jesse Helms, and individual states are left free to decide if they will officially observe the holiday.

Today: Martin Luther King Day is widely observed throughout the United States (including North Carolina) on the third Monday in January. The observance seems generally more visible than the Presidents' Day set aside to honor the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

1983: Neil Simon's Brighton Beach Memoirs appears on Broadway as Simon attempts to shed his image as a mere "gag-man" and to portray himself as the author of more "serious" comedy. The first in an autobiographical trilogy, Brighton Beach Memoirs wins Simon a number of enthusiastic supporters among the critics.

Today: Simon has failed to win an enduring reputation as a "serious" artist, even though more recent plays like Proposals (1997) continue to promise a more "mature" and serious Simon.

What Do I Read Next?

The Nerd (1981) is Shue's other full-length farce. It focuses on the humorous attempts of a group of friends to rid themselves of an obnoxious guest (the nerd of the title).

Wenceslas Square (1984) is a more serious play by Shue. It deals with political and social repression in Czechoslovakia in 1974.

Grandma Duck Is Dead (1979) is the one-act play that launched Shue's playwrighting career. This comedy is set in a messy dorm room at an Illinois college in the late-1960s and was inspired by Shue's own college experiences.

What the Butler Saw (1969), by British playwright Joe Orton, is a more bizarre, sensational farce that seeks to shock its audience through irreverent behavior and frequent references to sex. *The Odd Couple* (1965) is Neil Simon's most famous comedy, distinguished its ingenious situation and "one-liner" humor.

The Invisible Empire (1986), by William Loren Katz, is a history of the Ku Klux Klan specifically designed for the student reader. An annotated bibliography describes other histories of the organization.

Help for Shy People and Anyone Else Who Ever Felt Ill at Ease on Entering a Room Full of Strangers (1981), by speech communication therapist Gerald M. Phillips, explains what causes shyness and how to overcome it.

Further Study

Gorsline, David L. *Larry Shue, An Appreciation,* http// www.geocities.com/SoHo/Studios/4753/Shue.html, July 14, 1998.

A tribute to Shue that includes biographical information not found elsewhere, along with interesting details regarding the production of Shue's plays.

"Larry Shue," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* Vol. 52, Gale, 1989, pp. 390-94.

Excerpts from twelve critical essays covering Shue's major plays, including Douglas Watt, Frank Rich, John Simon, and Edith Oliver on *The Foreigner*.

"Shue, Larry," in *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 145, Gale, 1995, pp. 411-13.

An overview of Shue's life and work with biographical information, a brief summary and assessment of his plays, and a list of newspaper and magazine articles referring to Shue.

Winer, Laurie. "Theatre Jerry Zaks, Guide to *Wenceslas Square* " in the New York Times, February 28,1988, Section 2, p. 5.

Jerry Zaks, director of the original New York production of *The Foreigner*, is quoted extensively and his comments reveal much about Shue's personality and skill as a playwright.

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Watt, Douglas." 'Foreigner' Sounds Like a Lot of Nonsense Talk" in the *Daily News,* November 2, 1984.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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