

STUDY GUIDE

UNDERCOVER

A WORLD
PREMIERE
PRODUCTION WITH
TARRAGON
THEATRE



A SPONTANEOUS THEATRE CREATION

BD&P
MYSTERY
THEATRE
SERIES

vertigo
THEATRE

BY REBECCA NORTHAN AND BRUCE HORAK
DIRECTED BY REBECCA NORTHAN

Rebecca Northan & John Ulyatt Photo by Emily Cooper

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Vertigo Theatre is committed to creating a welcoming atmosphere for schools and to assist teachers and parent chaperones with that process. It is our wish to foster and develop our relationship with our student audience members. It is our intention to create positive theatre experiences for young people by providing study guides and post-show “talk backs” with our actors and theatre personnel, in order to enrich students’ appreciation of theatre as an art form and enhance their enjoyment of our plays.

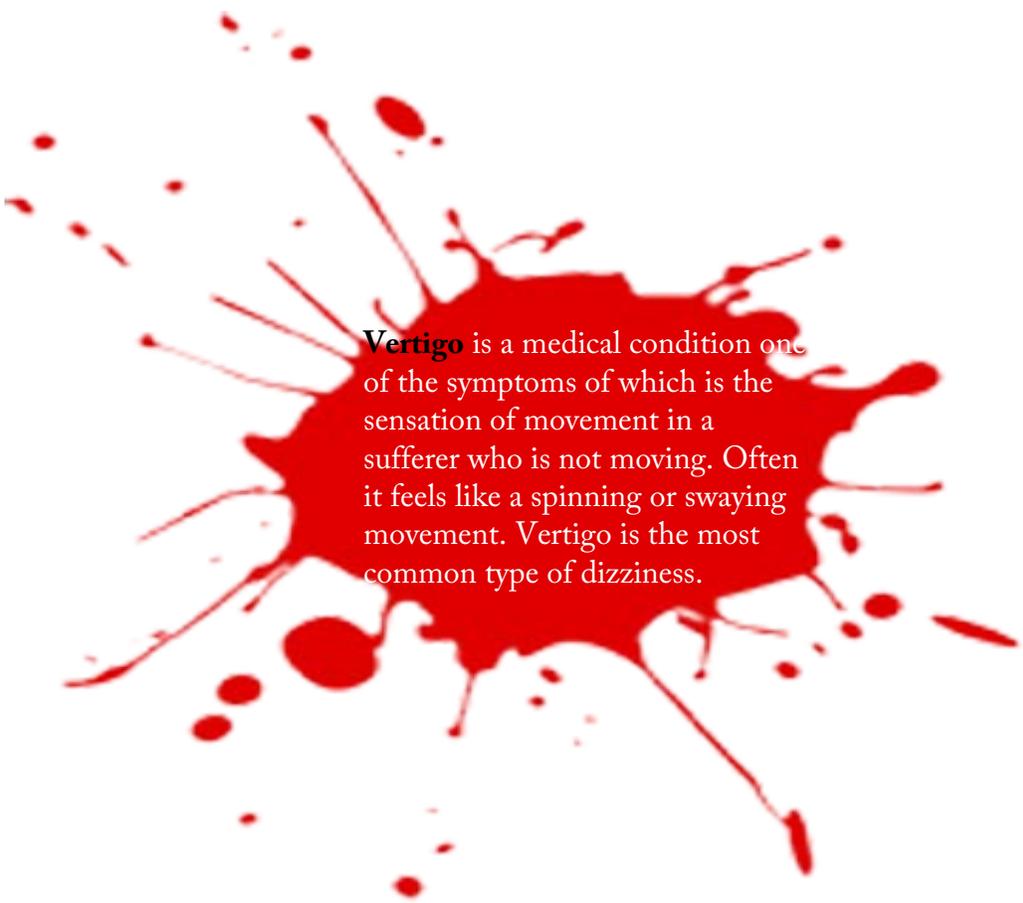
INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the study guide for Vertigo Theatre and Tarragon Theatre's co-production of *Undercover*, a Spontaneous Theatre Creation by Rebecca Northan and Bruce Horak.

In this guide you will find information about the inspirations behind this unique production, the creative team and performers involved, as well as a variety of activities to do with your class before and after the show. There are activities suitable for class discussion, individual writing projects, as well as games and exercises that get students moving around and learning on their feet.

For this production, you'll find activities that will get students writing and improvising with games and concepts that are similar to what the creators used to make the show.

We've endeavoured to make this guide work for instructors, as well as for students. Sometimes your students might read an unusual word or term and feel some "vertigo", so we've got handy-dandy blood splatters that give definitions. Like this:



Vertigo is a medical condition one of the symptoms of which is the sensation of movement in a sufferer who is not moving. Often it feels like a spinning or swaying movement. Vertigo is the most common type of dizziness.

ENJOY!

TOP 10 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT GOING TO THE THEATRE

Because some of you may be first-time theatre attendees (and some of you more experienced theatregoers may need a little reminder), we've compiled a Top 10 list of some of [New York Show Tickets Do's and Don'ts of Broadway Theatre Etiquette](#) as well as a few of our own:

1. **Power Down**

Turn off your cell phone, people. Turn. It. Off. And, no, putting your cell phone on vibrate isn't good enough - the people next to you can hear that weird buzzing sound, too. Besides which, the use of cameras and recording devices in the theatre is strictly prohibited.

2. **Don't Send Text Messages During the Show**

You may think you're being all incognito, but in a darkened theatre, the light from your cell phone screen is incredibly distracting to those around you. And why do you still have your phone on anyway? We just told you to turn it off!

3. **Eat Your Lunch Before the Show, NOT during it**

This isn't the movies. Eating, drinking or chewing gum is not permitted in the theatre. There is a water fountain out in the lobby for your use during the intermission.

4. **Unwrap Cough Drops and Candies in Advance**

If you anticipate any coughing fits during the show, be sure to unwrap your lozenges before the performance starts and have them at the ready. That crinkling sound is like nails on a chalkboard during a quiet play. And, no, unwrapping it S-L-O-W-L-Y does not help the situation ... it's much, much worse.

5. **Pre-Show=PreChatter**

When the houselights go down at the beginning of the play, this lets you know that we're starting. It is at this moment that the actors and technical staff do their final preparation for the opening moment, so please let them do their work by being quiet and respectful.

6. **Don't Be A Disruptive Miss Manners**

Sure, it's irritating when someone's cell phone goes off, but what's even worse is when it's followed by a series of annoyed "Tsks," "Hmphs," hisses, snarls, and shouts of "Turn it off!" can be just as distracting as the original disruption.

7. **Zip Those Lips**

A quick whisper to your neighbour, or an audible reaction to something interesting that happens on stage is fine (this is the live theatre, not the morgue), but keep conversations to the intermission and after the show.

8. **Stay put, watch and enjoy the play.**

If you absolutely must use the washroom during the performance, please exit the theatre quickly and quietly. You will be readmitted to the theatre at the discretion of the House Manager.

9. **You're not in your Living Room**

Please do not stand up, walk around or put your feet on the seat or stage in front of you. Everyone around you, including the actors, will appreciate it.

10. **Enjoy Yourself!**

Come to the theatre to get swept away into another world. Be sure to thank all of the artists for their hard work by applauding during the curtain call.

CAST AND CREW CREDITS

THE CAST

DAMIEN ATKINS	Daniel Murphy
CHRISTY BRUCE	Lia Da Costa
DENNIS CAHILL	Graeme Nelson
TERRA HAZELTON	Brook Pounsbury
BRUCE HORAK	Co-Creator, Peter Vinen
REBECCA NORTHAN	Georgie Vinen/ Roberta Collins

CREATIVE TEAM

REBECCA NORTHAN	Creator/Director/Actor
GLENN DAVIDSON	Set and Lighting Designer
BRANDON KLEIMAN	Costume Designer
MIKE RINALDI	Sound Design and Composer
CRAIG HALL	Dramaturg
MARK BELLAMY	Creative Consultant
MARCIE JANUSKA	Stage Manager
EMMA BRAGER	Stage Manager
MEREDITH JOHNSON	Assistant Stage Manager
CHANDLER ONTKEAN	Apprentice Stage Manager
KEVIN COREY	Head of Props

TIME & PLACE

Present day: an estate in the Springbank Area

COZIES AND COPS

When working on *Undercover*, the creators drew inspiration from the “cozy mystery” genre and from modern “police procedural” shows like *Law and Order*. So what are the conventions of these two forms?

THE COZY MYSTERY

A “cozy mystery” is a mystery sub-genre that contains no gore and minimal violence, hence the term. Unlike the hard-boiled or noir genres, which often see an imperfect policeman or private investigator working in a dark and corrupt city, the cozy genre favours amateur sleuths with country homes or small towns as settings. Agatha Christie’s *Miss Marple* series of books exemplifies the form. Marple is an elderly woman who often finds herself embroiled in a mystery in her hometown of St. Mary Mead. Television has had its own “cozy”: the hugely successful *Murder, She Wrote*. It starred Angela Lansbury as amateur detective Jessica Fletcher, and aired 264 episodes over 12 seasons, winning numerous awards.



THE POLICE PROCEDURAL

If the “cozy mystery” is often about an amateur, the “police procedural” is firmly about the professionals. Police Procedurals follow detectives as they investigate a crime from the discovery of a body to the confrontation with the culprit. The action typically involves the gathering of evidence at the crime scene, the interviewing of witnesses, the analysis of forensic information, the identification and interrogation of suspects, and frequently culminates in a confession or confrontation with the culprit. The lead characters in these stories are generally of the idealistic but flawed variety. They are usually police officers, but could also be forensic examiners or other such jobs within the police force.



This is one of the most popular genres in literature, film, and television. Popular novelists include Ed McBain, Georges Simenon, Faye Kellerman, Michael Connelly, and Chelsea Cain. In television, there's the whole Law and Order franchise, which has been running for almost 30 years in its various incarnations, making it one of the most popular shows of all time.

Undercover also draws from another genre: improvisation. But it's not a purely improvised show either. It's a hybrid form called Spontaneous Theatre.



Spontaneous Theatre is defined by a repeatable narrative structure with an audience member in the lead role introducing uncontrolled variables. Rebecca Northan, Intermission Magazine

SYNOPSIS & CHARACTERS

SYNOPSIS

Bring your inner investigator to the theatre and get ready to go UNDERCOVER. Rebecca Northan, creator of international sensation Blind Date, and her partners in improvisational crime are looking to recruit one intrepid audience member for an undercover ride into the criminal mind. When everyone is a suspect, will our rookie detective be able to discern clues and see that justice is served? Join the adventure as the audience gets embroiled in a mystery they will never forget.

CHARACTERS

DETECTIVE SERGEANT	35, ranking officer
ROOKIE DETECTIVE	a willing participant from the audience
PETER VINEN	a visually impaired artist, married to Georgie Vinen
GEORGIE VINEN	an heiress, dabbles in private art sales, married to Peter
MR. POUNSBURY	Georgie's father, deceased
BROOKE POUNSBURY	a builder, self-made, Georgie's cousin
DANIEL	the temporary estate manager (NOT a butler!)
GRAEME NELSON	a city councillor, and an old friend of the family
LIA DA COSTA	a childhood friend of Georgie's, rumoured to have ties to organized crime

PRE-SHOW PROJECTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVISATION



In her TED Talk, UNDERCOVER co-creator Rebecca Northan (pictured above) speaks about using the skills of improvisation to “diffuse your fear.” Though she says that there are a number of guidelines for good improvisation, here are her top four:

1. Be Positive
2. Say Yes
3. Embrace Failure
4. Inspire Your Partner

Watch the Ted Talk and have a class discussion about it. Here are some questions that you could discuss as a class or write about:

- Why is improvisation a good life skill?
- Why do you think that many people are afraid of improvising?
- Of the four guidelines Northan discusses, which one do you think you’re the best at? Which one do you need to work the most at?
- Northan mentions that failure has a very bad connotation, but that it’s the quickest way to learn something. Think of a significant failure in your life and identify what you learned from it. Do you think about it the same way now as you did when it happened?

IN THE HOT SEAT



“Hot-seating” is a technique that performers sometimes use to learn more about a character and get used to experiencing life as a different person. The performer comes up with a character and figures out some details about that person. This could be things like:

- Name
- Past History
- Family
- Profession
- Likes/Dislikes
- Values

With these ideas in mind, the performer enters into the space “in character” and sits down in a chair, the hot-seat. The audience asks the performer questions and she answers in character. Open-ended questions are best, as they get the performer explaining things and not just answering with yes or no.

As the performer answers the questions, both she and the audience learn more about the character. The answers themselves can be revealing, but even the character’s reactions to the questions can be telling. Is she delighted to answer or defensive?

This exercise can also be done by writers and is a great way to get to know a character and find his “voice”. Follow the same process. Think of a character and write out the details of his or her life, using the above topics as a place to start. Then try asking questions and answering them as the character. Whether speaking the answers or writing them, you’ll often find that a character can begin to take on a life of his own

WHAT'S YOUR STATUS



“Status games involve the conscious manipulation of our level of dominance... Status is not confusing so long as we understand it as something we do, rather than our social position; for example, a king can play low status to a servant, while a servant can play high status to a king... Our behaviour (reinforced by our appearance) signals our importance, or lack of importance.”

—Impro for Storytellers by Keith Johnstone

Status is one of the key concepts that the performers in UNDERCOVER make use of. Status is at play in all aspects of our lives. We play status games with our friends, our parents, teachers, and strangers. You can raise or lower your own status, and you can raise or lower someone else’s.

Some examples of high status behaviour are: frequent and sustained eye-contact; upright posture; clear speech; and strong and slightly slower physical gestures and movement.

Some examples of low status behaviour are: darting or infrequent eye-contact; poor posture or protective gestures like crossed arms; speech that is broken up with many “umms” or speech that ends in a questioning inflection or a drop in volume; and quick, darting, or jerky movement.

Think of how you behave when you’re in various situations with the different groups of people in your life. Do you maintain a consistent status or do you adjust? In which situations do you feel people raising or lowering your status?

As an exercise, take a simple action for a scene and write it two times, but with two different statuses. For example, the scene could be a new student arriving for the first day of class. In the first version, he’s high status, and then low status in the second version. He will have the same basic actions like entering the room, greeting the teacher, and sitting down, but the way in which he carries these out will be very different depending on his status.



YOUR BURNING QUESTIONS

There will be a question and answer session after the show. What questions do you have about putting on the play? What have you always wanted to know about theatre? What do you want to know about being an actor?

PRE-SHOW ACTIVITIES

The creators of UNDERCOVER all share a background in improvisation that began at Loose Moose Theatre Company, Calgary's famed school of improvisation. "The Moose", as it's affectionately known, was formed in 1977 by Keith Johnstone and Mel Tonkin. Offering training and opportunities to perform, it has served as a training ground for many of the world's top improvisers, actors, comedians, and writers. It was also where Keith Johnstone created a number of improv formats that are now commonplace in improv theatres internationally, including Theatresports®, Maestro®, Gorilla Theatre®, and The Life Game®.



When creating Undercover, the performers used a variety of improv techniques, games, and exercises to develop the show. Though there are numerous games that one might recommend, here are two Keith Johnstone games that were hand-picked by creator/performer Rebecca Northan as great places to start.

THE SANDY CAROL GAME

The “Sandy Carol Game” is excellent for beginners, as it helps the performer to feel what it’s like to act positively and accept offers, which can help in creating interesting scenes. Northan says, “Sandy Carol was a volunteer at Loose Moose in the 80s, and the most positive improviser of all time. So, the game was inspired by him, and named after him.”

Here’s how it works:

1. Set-up the basic components of a scene for two performers. That is, where it takes place (eg. a lake in the woods), a relationship between the two characters (eg. father and daughter), and an activity (eg. fishing).
2. Person A is responsible for moving the action of the scene forward by making “offers” (ie. Any verbal or physical input). Person B can only say, "Yes" or "Sounds good to me" or "I'll go along with that.”
3. This challenges both improvisers in different ways. Person A learns how to move a scene forward, while including her scene partner. Person B learns about accepting what is offered and bringing a positive spirit to his performance.
4. You might also try this game with the opposite piece of direction, where Person B is negative, to see what the difference is.

Questions for Discussion

- How did each performer feel about the contributions of the other? Was the scene fun? Did you feel inspired?
- If you tried the variation with a negative partner, what were the differences? How did the action of the scene change and what did it feel like for each performer?
- For the audience, what did you notice about the scene?
- How does this relate to life? Can you think of situations where you responded either very negatively or very positively to another person’s suggestions? How about as a person making suggestions? What is it like when someone is negative or positive?

THE ACTOR'S NIGHTMARE



In the theatre world, there is a type of anxiety dream that many performers have, which is called an “actor’s nightmare”. Typically, the dreamer imagines that he is in a play in front of an audience, but that he doesn’t know the lines or what he’s supposed to do. He has to pay attention as best he can and hope that he doesn’t get discovered.

The improv game “The Actor’s Nightmare” re-creates this set-up, but instead of causing anxiety, the game teaches you about what it means to really listen.

Here are the rules:

1. Begin by choosing a piece of written text. This could be lines from a play or screenplay, but could also be from a novel, where there is a significant amount of back and forth dialogue.
2. Person A gets to use the text, making use of only one side of a conversation. Person B is having the “nightmare” and has to make sense of the scene with improvised text. So he’s going to be forced to listen very well!
3. Person B reacts to whatever line is spoken to her and tries to respond honestly and keep the scene moving forward. Person A is still only allowed to use the assigned lines, so he has to try to speak them in a way that responds to Person B without changing the words.
4. Though both performers are having different experiences, they still have to work together to make the scene work.

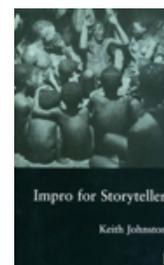
Questions for Discussion

- What was each person’s experience like?
- Did Person A try to help Person B or did he let her struggle? What was the result for the scene?
- In improv, listening is very important. One way to think about it is that good listening is “the possibility of change”. The opposite might be “waiting to speak”. Can you think of moments in life where you have listened in both of these ways? What are the usual outcomes of these two approaches?

If you’re intrigued about improvisation, you might try taking a class at Loose Moose Theatre Company (loosemoose.com), or have a look at the following two books by its co-founder:

Improv by Keith Johnstone

Improv for Storytellers by Keith Johnstone



POST -SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you think of the experience of seeing an audience member performing onstage and being the lead character in the story?
2. How is it different watching a play when you know that it's improvised or partially improvised rather than fully scripted?
3. Did you notice any moments where the performers had to deal with something particularly unexpected? How did they handle it?
4. The creators took inspiration from the “cozy mystery” and “police procedural” genres (see “Cozies and Cops” earlier in the guide). How did the performers make use of the genres?
5. Now that you have seen the show, would you like to have played the Rookie? Why or why not?

THE ART OF THE THEATRE REVIEW

Now that you've seen the production, it's time to write a review. But how do you do it? Where do you start? The Guardian Theatre critic Lyn Gardner *suggests*:

A traditional theatre review often begins by giving the reader some background about a production, a brief outline of plot and themes, a sense of what the staging looks (and sounds) like; it offers an evaluation of the writing, the production and the performances and concludes with a summing up.

But, most importantly, she says that:

The first rule is that there are no rules – you're writing a review to express your thoughts and feelings about a theatre show, not taking an exam. There are as many ways to write a review as there are personal responses to any production. There is no right or wrong. Allow yourself to develop your own distinctive voice, and be honest about what you really think about a production: convey your enthusiasm for it or explain why you disliked it. Don't worry about going out on a limb. A timid theatre review is often a dull read. The hardest reviews to write are not about the shows you passionately loved or hated, but about ones that were just so-so.

To begin, jot down what stuck with you in the production.

- What do you remember the most?
- Which performances did you love and why?
- What did you think of the costumes, the set, the lighting, the sound?
- Did you like the story?
- Did the production make you feel something?

This last question is perhaps the most important. Kenneth Tynan, one of the most celebrated critics of all time said the following about that very topic:

If a play does anything—either tragically or comically, satirically or farcically—to explain to me why I am alive, it is a good play. If it seems unaware that such questions exist, I tend to suspect that it's a bad one.

By “explain to me why I am alive”, Tynan is suggesting that a play should speak to you about some aspect of your life. Some other questions you could address are:

- If you lost interest, where did the production go wrong?
- Was there a part of the story that you had difficulty accepting? A performance you didn't believe? A twist in the story that didn't make sense?
- Would you recommend this play to others? Was it worth your time?

Bonus Activity!

Can you summarize your review in the length of a tweet? You get 140 characters. This includes spaces!

If you're on [Twitter](#), tag Vertigo with [@vertigotheatre](#), so we can know what you thought!

ABOUT VERTIGO THEATRE

We are a professional, not-for-profit charitable organization with a dual artistic mandate.

Our mission is to thrill, entertain and challenge by creating theatre that ignites the curiosity of our community. We are dedicated to the revitalization of the Mystery Theatre genre and to inspiring and mentoring the next generation of arts leaders.

Our vision is to be a premiere cultural institution in Calgary. Vertigo Theatre occupies a unique place in Calgary's cultural landscape as:

- The only professional theatre in Canada producing a series of professional plays based in the mystery genre
- Providing a performance home for other arts and arts education organizations
- Committed to mentorship and training in all areas – artistic, production and administration

Vertigo Theatre is a member of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres and engages under the terms of The Canadian Theatre Agreement professional artists who are members of the Canadian Actor's Equity Association

EDUCATION & OUTREACH PROGRAM STUDENT MATINEES

BD&P Mystery Theatre Series

Vertigo is the only professional theatre company in Canada that produces a full season of plays based in the mystery genre, encompassing classical and contemporary work that stimulates, entertains and engages the audience.

ACCESS FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES (AYA) PROGRAM

Theatre for young audiences is an exceptional art form that, over and over again, has proven to be a significant contributing factor in the development of children. Studies have shown that sustained exposure to the performing arts at an early age develops an appreciation of music, dance and theatre that lasts a lifetime.

The Access for Young Audiences program offers a much-needed resource to schools and community groups that represent children and teens who are considered 'high needs' by providing low-cost or free tickets to productions in our BD&P Mystery Theatre Series. The AYA program levels socio-economic backgrounds and allows kids to be kids, and teens to relate to each other on a deeper, more meaningful level. Children and teens are exposed to positively positioned real-life issues (bullying, drug-addiction or racism), and the concept and impact of empathy for others. Most importantly, the AYA program is a tool to incubate the next generation of artists and arts supporters.