

STUDY GUIDE





SEASON 35 2019 - 2020

401.723.4266

GAMMTHEATRE.ORG

1245 JEFFERSON BLVD WARWICK, RI

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This study guide was prepared by Beth Pollard, Kate Hanson, Susie Schutt, and Jon Del Sesto. Photos by Peter Goldberg

ACT I

WELCOME

Dear Educator,

The Gamm Theatre is pleased to offer you this study guide to prepare you and your students for our production of *Admissions* by Joshua Harmon. In this guide you will find background information about the play and playwright, an inside look at our production, as well as activities for your classroom and questions for discussion. We recommend using this study guide before your visit to The Gamm, as well as after to debrief with your students.

We would like to offer a pre-show visit with your classroom/school before your visit to help prepare your students for the play. This will whet students' appetites for the performance and encourage them to question and explore the themes of the play. This visit will last about a half an hour and is offered to your classroom free of charge. Most student matinees are followed by a talkback with the production team and offer students the opportunity to debrief the performance immediately and ask questions of the actors, director, designers or playwright. Talkbacks range in length but we encourage you to stay and participate in the dynamic discussion.

We also offer longer workshops that will get students out of their seats and up on their feet engaging in the motifs and the language of the play. Kinesthetic engagement with language and literature ensures students deep comprehension and text-to-self connection that encourages students to invest in reading and literacy-learning.

Attending a production addresses several Common Core Standards in Theatre Arts Standards in Aesthetic Judgment, Cultural Contexts, and Communication, as well as many of the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. Below, we have included a list of standards that align with attending a performance and using our study guide.

We would love to hear from you about your experiences using this study guide. It is a great help to us as we build on our education program from year to year. We look forward to seeing you at The Gamm!

Susie Schutt,

Education Director, susie@gammtheatre.org

Kate Hanson,

Associate Education Director, kate@gammtheatre.org



THEATRE AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

What is so exciting about attending the theatre - especially in a smaller space such as The Gamm - is that it is live! Live theatre is different from other forms of entertainment; unlike film and television you are encouraged to pay close attention and actively engage your imagination.

You, the audience, are mere feet (and sometimes inches!) away from the actors; therefore, you play an active role in the experience. **The actors can see and hear any distracting behavior such as talking, text messaging, unwrapping candy, the ringing of cell phones, etc.** This can affect the actor's concentration, disrupt the performance, and ruin the experience for other audience members. So we ask that you refrain from talking or making any noise during a performance. *Thank you!*

TIP:

Discuss with your students the particular demands and benefits of attending a live performance. Perhaps have them brainstorm how theatre is different from film, television and sporting events.

COMMON CORE GUIDE.

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2] **See** *Themes* and **Questions** for **Discussion**

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY. CCRA.R.3] See Themes and Questions for Discussion

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4] **See our Activity for the Classroom**

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7] **See examples throughout our study guide.**

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.9] **See our Resident Scholar's interview with the playwright.**

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3] See our Activity for the Classroom

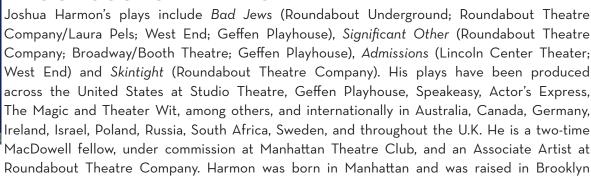
Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1] See Themes and Questions for Discussion

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2] **See examples throughout our study guide.**



PLAY & PLAYWRIGHT

ABOUT JOSHUA HARMON



and the suburbs of New York. He is a graduate of Northwestern University, Carnegie Mellon University, and Juilliard.

ABOUT "ADMISSIONS"

Admissions opened off-broadway in 2018, written by the up and coming playwright Joshua Harmon. It went on to win the prestigious Drama Desk Award and has since been produced by a myriad of regional theatre companies in the US and Canada, including the current production running at the Gamm Theatre. The story follows several parents working at a prep school in New England, which their children attend as high school seniors. The central issues of this play revolve around the intergenerational white liberal families and their differing perspectives on the subjects of racial diversity and inclusion within elite education. While many critics, like Jesse Green of the New York Times celebrate the play as "an extraordinarily useful and excruciating satire-- of the left, by the left, for the left-- for today," many others note the irony of a racial issue play written and performed exclusively by white people. In this study guide, we hope to give you some critical tools in order to best understand the production, its audience impact, and your personal opinions on the subject after seeing the play.





OUR PRODUCTION

THE COMPANY

Sherri Rosen-Mason
Bill Mason
Charlie Mason
Ginnie Peters
Roberta

Deb Martin
Jim O'Brien
Jacob Osborne
Karen Carpenter
Wendy Overly

CREATIVE TEAM

DIRECTOR SET DESIGN COSTUME DESIGN LIGHTING DESIGN

Bryn Boice Patrick Lynch Amanda Downing Carney Steve McLellan

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT/

SOUND DESIGN STAGE MANAGEMENT STAGE MANAGEMENT
Charles Cofone Jessica Hill Jenna Worden

Assistant Director Madison Cook-Hines

Technical Director Max Ramirez
Technical Production Supervisor DJ Potter

Assistant Stage Managers Jessica Chace, Jessica Winward

Electricians Mike Cline, Alex Landers, Patrick Boutwell

Construction Crew Justin Carroll, Alex Eizenberg

TIP:

Before coming to the theater, discuss with your students the various professions in the theater. It takes more than just actors! When they arrive, ask them to notice evidence of those professions at work.





GAMM EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

While actors, directors, and playwrights are the most well-known, there are many jobs and careers that make theater successful. Each of our study guides focus on a different theater career by highlighting a Gamm employee.

DREW WRIGHT | BOX OFFICE MANAGER

What does your job entail?

Selling tickets, subscription packages, and group tickets; patron assistance; and managing and organizing front of house staffing for our shows.

Why is your job important to The Gamm's success?

Tickets and subscriptions make up about half the Gamm's income, so we'd be in a lot of trouble if there wasn't somebody here to sell them!

What led you to your position at The Gamm?

I've worked in box offices on and off since the mid-2000s and always enjoyed it, so when I saw a box office position posted at The Gamm, I jumped at the opportunity!

Why theater?

I'd been involved in theater all through school and for a while after, and there's an immediacy to a live performance that you can't get anywhere else.

What, if any, other professions are you curious about?

Being a professional basketball player looks fun, but I'm not very tall or good at sports and I don't really like basketball, so obviously there'd be some hurdles there.

What special skills does your position entail?

Some quick decision-making and a little math, but the most important skill in the Box Office is staying patient and calm when there's a hundred things happening all at once.

What is your favorite flavor of ice cream?

Strawberry!

DIRECTORS NOTE

BY BRYN BOICE

When I first read Admissions by contemporary playwriting phenom Joshua Harmon, I was simultaneously repulsed and delighted. I, not unlike our main character, Sherri, am a 45-year-old white woman working in a field that endeavors at all times to "stay woke." Harmon has successfully captured the conundrum of the white liberal, and the hypocrisy of attempts to invite inclusivity while also trying to scrape resources back to oneself when they seem threatened. His play brilliantly exposes this ridiculousness: the inability to see outside our own orbit of experience. The "bubble" this family lives in, masterfully constructed by Harmon, provides a very thin film through which the voyeur-audience can view and reflect. The play pushes buttons and, I think, ultimately will open us up beyond mere discussion to action.

SHERRI

...It seems to me, year after year, you thwart my efforts to--

ROBERTA

I don't thwart anything Sherri I just don't have this same fixation on race as you do.

SHERR

If no one fixated on it, nothing would ever change!

Scene 1. Admissions

In our current moment, it is hard not to watch this play and muse on the recent court case with Harvard admissions, and of the celebrity admissions bribery scandal in early 2019. But, despite the scale of the surrounding world and the major systemic issues it addresses, *Admissions* is really a personal, private story. One family has to examine their morals at a defining moment. One family has to make principled decisions. One family has to check their privilege. I am thankful to get to work on this play with this incredibly thoughtful cast and design team, and to grapple with these conflicting ideas about what it means to mean well and to do right.



DRAMATURG'S NOTE

BY RACHEL WALSHE

"True integration, true equality, requires a surrendering of advantage, and when it comes to our own children, that can feel almost unnatural." - Choosing α School for My Daughter in α Segregated City by Nikole Hannah-Jones (New York Times, June 9, 2016)

Joshua Harmon's explosive Admissions animates two impulses at work in many upper-middle-class, liberal families. The first impulse is to embrace and cultivate principles of diversity and inclusion in various dimensions of family life. The second impulse is to provide "the best" resources attainable for one's children. Nowhere do these impulses clash more violently than in the arena of school choice.

Many liberal families signal allegiance to principles of diversity and equity by seeking schools that prioritize inclusive pedagogies. These families, much like the Mason family at the center of *Admissions*, are motivated to embrace these school environments by a deep sense of duty – by a desire to remediate the benefits afforded them by a system rigged to value wealth and whiteness. In *Admissions*, Sherri Rosen-Mason seeks to balance this ledger by focusing her efforts on diversifying her son Charlie's private boarding school population. She is head of admissions at Hillcrest Academy, and is celebrating a marginal gain in adding students of color to the school's incoming freshman class. As Sherri sees it, she is not only making Hillcrest available to underprivileged youth, she is enacting a cultural principle she holds sacrosanct.

This principle is violently challenged once it is met with Sherri's impulse to protect her son. Platitudes about diversity and integration look nice on a glossy brochure, but they mean something quite different when Sherri is faced with the reality of where and how to educate her own son. She is forced to confront the vulnerability of her liberal pieties in a plot twist I will not reveal. Suffice it to say that these pieties are embarrassingly and recognizably fragile. One need look no further than the cover of a recent month's People magazine featuring a haggard Lori Laughlin – now facing a 45-year prison sentence for allegedly paying half-million-dollar-bribes to bolster her daughters' chances of gaining admission to USC – to see what lengths parents will go to in order to secure their child's place in the pipeline that promises social and economic success. There are also plenty of legal ways to pay for access to this pipeline. Consider Mighty Prep, a Los Angeles-based SAT-prep and tutoring service catering to the uber-rich. A mix of academic coaching, pep talks and insider tricks, Mighty Prep promises the kinds of high scores required of the elite schools to which their clientele (i.e. two-Tesla households) seek admission. Here in Rhode Island, families can flee the deeply troubled Providence schools so long as they can scare up the \$40,000 a year tuition to attend one of the city's elite private schools.

Admissions exposes that most diversity, equity, and inclusion policies – no matter how well meaning – are engineered to benefit the privileged. New York Times writer Nikole Hanna-Jones rightfully asserts: "Diversity functions as a boutique offering for the children of the privileged but does little to ensure quality education for poor black and Latino children." In other words, it's all fine and good to invite poor kids to your party, but there's no way in hell my kids are going to yours. What racist, classist hogwash.



STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

TIP:

Assign these questions for homework or in-class writing and then discuss your students' answers before and after the show.

THEMES AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING

- 1. How did the set design aid in the telling of the story? What would you change and why?
- 2. What sort of atmosphere was created with the lighting, sound, and music?
- 3. What does the Gamm poster (also the cover of this study guide) tell you about the play? What sort of poster would you design for this play and why?
- 4. Why do you think the playwright chose this title? How does the title relate to the story?

"I DON'T SEE COLOR"

In the first scene of the play, a long term employee of the school, Roberta, declares "I don't see color. Maybe that's my problem. I'm not a race person. I don't look at race". Even just a decade ago, this was a widely used and commonly accepted phrase by many white liberal Americans. Many of them believed that they could see beyond their own racial biases, and ignore them in their decision making. In psychology, we call this implicit bias, which the Kirwan Institute of Ohio State University defines as "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner." However, phrases like "I don't see color" don't truly acknowledge the reality of inequality that internalized racism forces upon people of color. So, for many people without the benefits of white privilege, hearing "I don't see color," simply translates to: "I don't see you". Over the past decade, many discussions of race and racism in America have changed their language and approach to combat this kind of implicit bias by prioritizing diversity and representation. Still, much of this discussion is still led by the systematically privileged, and not by people of color.

Questions

• How do we talk about race now? Discuss in groups what is appropriate language and vocabulary to use when discussing racial politics. What vocabulary is outdated?

(Questions continued on next page)

- You might have a story of an awkward conversation with family, friends, or strangers, in which they used well-meaning but politically inappropriate language. If not, imagine a conversation with a cousin, or a customer in a restaurant in which they casually use a term which is nowadays deemed offensive. What would you do in that situation? Would you feel the need to challenge them? Would you feel empowered and/or capable to speak up? What factors might assist you or restrict you having this discussion?
- The writer, actors, and stage crew for Admissions are all white. Why does it matter who is in the room? The 17 year old son character in the play says: "If there are going to be new voices at the table, someone has to stand up and offer someone else his seat." Do you agree?
- Many people who have fallen into the fallacy of racial "colorblindness", or who make other misguided judgements, such as mistaking tokenism for representation, don't understand their own implicit biases. Harvard continues to research this phenomenon through ProjectImplicit, which helps people to understand social biases of which they are not aware. If you wish, you can take some of the tests at implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/. If you choose to participate in the research, consider these questions for your own introspection.
 - 1. Before taking the quiz, what social biases do you suspect you may have?
 - 2. After the test, consider some of the external factors which might have contributed to one's internal bias. What is a reflection of your circumstances and what is a reflection of you as an individual? How can we separate these two approaches to understanding oneself?
 - 3. What are some disadvantages and advantages to knowing one's implicit biases?

THE APPLICATION OF A LIFETIME

Even before high school, the stress of college applications can begin for many students around the country. Parents and schools push their teenaged children to get not only the highest possible grades, but to participate in multiple extracurriculars, to perform well on standardized tests, to volunteer, to find internships, and/or to get a part time job. Recently, several high-profile parents were caught bribing coaches and administrators to let their children into top ranked colleges. This considerable ramp up in pressure affects our high-schoolers' mental health and contributes significantly to a culture of intense competition. It can also sometimes make it seem like college is the be-all end-all of living a successful life, since the 21st century skilled labor economy demands at least one undergraduate degree. In Admissions we certainly see the toll of this hyper competitive youth culture, but it also asks us to question why such a pressure filled college application process exists so prevalently in America today.

Questions

• Over the past few generations, many things about post-secondary education have changed dramatically, from tuition prices to demographic enrolment to the proportion of college-educated people in society. Why do you think that things have changed so much in 50-60 years? What are the positives and negatives of such rapid social change?

(Questions continued on next page)

- Do other countries demonstrate a similar relationship with post-secondary education? Which ones? Do some research on international college education. Some interesting places to start might be Canada, India, Slovenia, France, or Japan. What do different international approaches to admission requirements, tuition, and job opportunities help us to understand about why America's system exists as it does? What does it tell us about our cultural values?
- How much do you personally think about life after high school? What are
 your expectations surrounding your potential future opportunities? How does
 thinking about your future make you feel? How does it affect your relationships?
- In Admissions, the concept of "hard work" comes up several times to argue that someone is deserving of an achievement and that another is not. There is a pervasive idea in our culture that "hard work" can lift any individual out of their problematic situations or the disadvantages of their marginalized identity. What power do you think hard work has in changing one's situation? How can we measure hard work in relationship to worthiness? Should we?

NONSENSE

In the first reading for the Gamm's production of Admissions, the director, Bryn Boice, discussed her love of satirical nonsense. She said that this production makes people seem completely hilarious, hypocritical, and deeply ridiculous. This led her to question how much true meaning can be derived from absurdity, and how it is that we comprehend nonsense. Specifically, this led Boice to the aesthetics of dadaism, in particular, the art of Hannah Hoch, whose photo-collages she showed the cast and crew. Dadaism was an avant garde art movement of the early 20th century which grew into surrealism. It challenges the idea that art must have intentional meaning, and so many images involve dissonant unrealistic combinations which intrigue the viewer's inability to comprehend what's in front of their eyes. Boice explained that while this play is grounded in reality, and that she does not want to create a dadaist play, the real and imagined do come together in Admissions in a rather dadaist style which is filled with dissonance, ridicule, and an altered relationship with reality.

(Questions on next page)



Questions

- What is nonsense? Do people have a universal agreement on what is nonsense and what is not? How about reality? Can we really all agree on it? Why or why not?
- Below are some pictures of Hannah Hoch's work. She pioneered the art form of photo-collage, which took pictures and manipulated them through craft, not through digital means like photoshop. After observing these images, discuss with a friend how you interpret each picture's meaning, or lack thereof. What factors have led each of you to your own interpretation? Why do you think the director of a play based in reality like Admissions would find inspiration in Hoch's work?
- In the second half of Admissions, the teenage son, Charlie, insists that there is a difference between wanting things to look different and wanting things to be different. On the topic of racial diversity and inclusion, what could this statement mean? How much do images and appearances reflect, instigate, or prevent social change? What do you think the "nonsense" images of dadaism are trying to say about things looking different versus being different?
- Many people believe that art is not meant to comfort, rather it is meant to challenge and creatively critique the perspectives and lifestyles of its viewers. After seeing, Admissions, do you think it does more comforting or challenging of its audience members? Might it have different effects on different identities within the audience? Explain at what points, and to what extent, Admissions sought to either comfort or challenge the audience.









ACT V

ACTIVITY FOR THE CLASSROOM

ACTIVITY: BE A WRITER

(contains strong language)

Admissions attempts to capture the modern teenage experience. Joshua Harmon has written many monologues for the teenage Charlie, who often speaks to his parents without interruption.

- Read the excerpt below to yourself. What do you notice about the punctuation, sentence structure, and word choice?
- Read the excerpt below out loud. Do you think Harmon has written an authentic youth voice? How would you change this monologue to make it sound more realistic?
- How would you write a monologue of your own? Imagine what you might want to say to your parents/teachers without interruption. Consider recording yourself and then transcribing your writing. What did you notice about how you speak? How did you use punctuation and phrasing in your own monologue?

MONOLOGUE EXCERPT

CHARLIE: What happened is, there we are at basketball, on a five, and Perry finds out he got into Yale, and everyone's like oh my god, so awesome man, so great man, fuck yeah man, you're the man, man, who's the fucking man, Perry's the fucking man, So I check my phone and there it is: Dear Charles, delighted to consider you for admission, so many qualified candidates, record number applications, blah blah blah skim skim: We regret to inform you. As if-- like-- I don't think an institution can have feelings of regret, I don't think that's how regret works, but... I read the email, I read it again, and then I realize everyone's gotten really quiet. I turn around, and they're all staring at me, waiting for me to share my news. Everyone knew Perry and I both applied to Yale, everyone saw him get in, everyone heard him call his mother, I'm standing there holding my phone, everyone knows what I'm looking at, I couldn't get away. I was trapped, and so I had to be like: deferred. And everyone stayed really quiet, and then it was like, all the air just got sucked out of the place, and you could feel every single person feeling the exact same thing: How the FUCK did Perry Peters get into Yale and Charlie Mason get deferred? This is a small school. Everyone knows everything about everyone. And I literally know Perry better than anyone. I know him, we grew up together since we were three, we're best friends, I know everything about him, I know him. And he's a good student, he is, he is, but his grades are not better than mine. His SAT scores are not better than mine. I actually do like a million more extracurriculars, he just does that like computer science club which isn't even a club and basketball and baseball, and we're basically equally good, he's like a little better at baseball I'm a little better at basketball but neither of us is getting recruited anytime soon, I take three AP's he only takes 2 and, and maybe he did like ten extra hours during Stockings for Care but, that doesn't get you into Yale... And I just thought like, how did I not see this coming?

ACTIVITY: BE A THEATER REVIEWER

Reviews help people make everyday important decisions. Before the digital era, reviews were only written publicly by esteemed critics in papers. Nowadays, anyone can write a review about a product or place, on widely used platforms like Google Maps, Yelp, or their personal social media accounts. As a business, reviews can help you improve your platform, refine your product, and know if the targeted potential customers are being reached. As a customer, they help you to determine whether the product in question is right for you.

In this activity, you'll get to write your own review of *Admissions*. This is not a two sentence anonymous Amazon review, rather it should critically evaluate the play using brevity and wit. In 250 words or less, after watching the play, write a review that you would proudly put your name on. Do some of your own research on theatre reviews to inspire your writing. It will also help you to understand some of the basic structures and voices that reviewers use.

Your review should include the following:

- What do you think is this play's intention? (i.e. What do you think the Gamm wanted audiences
 to take away from this production?)
- Evaluate how successfully this production achieved the intended goals you've deduced from question 1. (i.e. what strengths and weaknesses did you find in the execution of the play's arguments?)





EPILOGUE



THANK YOU!

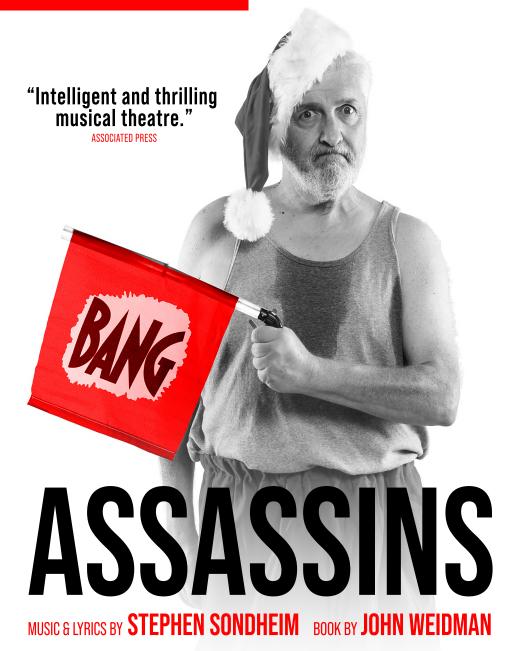
Thank you for joining us for *Admissions* and for working with this Study Guide to ensure the best, most comprehensive theatrical and educational experience. Please be in touch if you would like us to visit your classroom before or after you attend *Admissions*.

Our Education Department provides classes for students of various grade levels, as well as a month-long Gamm Summer Intensive for summer time theatre fun. Auditions for GSI are March 13, and May 2. Email kate@gammtheatre.org to schedule your audition.

We hope you will join us for more student matinees at The Gamm! To book a matinee, contact Drew at drew@gammtheatre.org or 401-723-4266 ext. 112. To learn more about Gamm Education, find us on the web at www.gammtheatre.org or reach Susie Schutt at 401-723-4266 ext. 121.



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