

JOQA



STUDY GUIDE

BY **AARON POSNER**
DIRECTED BY TONY ESTRELLA

GAMM
EDUCATION 

GAMM
theatre

SEASON 35
2019 - 2020

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

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 *JQA* by Aaron Posner. 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.*

ACT II

PLAY & PLAYWRIGHT



ABOUT AARON POSNER

Aaron is an award-winning playwright, director, teacher and former artistic director of two LORT theaters. His Helen Hayes Award-winning play, *Stupid F**king Bird*, was one of the 10 most produced plays in the country in 2015. Other plays include *Life Sucks* and *No Sisters* (both re-inventions of Chekhov), *District Merchants* (inspired by *The Merchant of Venice*), *Who Am I This Time? & Other Conundrums of Love* (adapted from Kurt Vonnegut), *The Chosen* and *My Name Is Asher Lev* (adapted from Chaim Potok), *Sometimes a Great Notion* (adapted from Ken Kesey) and several more. He has directed more than 150 productions at major regional theaters across the country, including Arena Stage, and currently lives outside of DC with his wife, actress Erin Weaver, and his amazing daughter, Maisie.

ABOUT “JQA”

Complicated, passionate and difficult, John Quincy Adams was a brilliant diplomat, ineffectual one-term president and congressman known for his eloquence, arrogance and integrity. This unique, highly-theatrical play by award-winning playwright Aaron Posner (*Stupid F**king Bird*) imagines key confrontations between JQA and some of America’s most dynamic figures: George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, his own father, John Adams and more. At once provocative, haunting and hilarious, this power play challenges the way we think of our country, our government and ourselves.

“JQA is an ambitious, delightful work that not only makes for an enjoyable theater experience, but also leaves its audiences ruminating on the deeper philosophies it explores....Something that will linger in minds long after the lights have lifted, much like any presidential legacy.” *Broadway World*



ACT III

OUR PRODUCTION

DIRECTOR
Tony Estrella

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
Tyler Dobrowsky

COSTUME DESIGN
Meg Donnelly

LIGHTING DESIGN
Steve McLellan

SET DESIGN
Michael McGarty

SOUND DESIGN
Charles Cofone

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT
Jessica Hill

STAGE MANAGEMENT
Kristen Gibbs

THE COMPANY

JQA/John Adams/Henry Clay **Normand Beauregard**
JQA/Andrew Jackson/Frederick Douglass **Jonathan Higginbotham**
JQA/George Washington/
Abigail Adams/Louisa Adams **Candice Brown**
JQA/Louisa Adams/Abraham Lincoln **Helena Tafuri**

CREATIVE TEAM

Technical Director **Max Ramirez**
Technical Production Supervisor **DJ Potter**
Assistant Stage Manager **Jessica Corsentino**
Dialect Coach **Candice Brown**
Electricians **Mike Cline, Alex Landers, Patrick Boutwell**
Construction Crew **Justin Carroll, Alex Eizenberg,
Christine Redihan, Cody Reed**

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.



RW: At Arena Stage and here at The Gamm, JQA is also depicted by actors who are neither his race nor gender.

AP: I think that I would love to see versions of this play where it is all women or all non-white actors. I think that keeping the casting options open means that it is open to a wide variety of possibilities. I am always indebted to Shakespeare in this way. He was only ever writing about what mattered to him and his people and his government at the time. I wrote it with today and today's issues and challenges at the forefront of my mind. It uses history purely as a way of having an abstract conversation. The episodes it depicts are historically plausible, if not historically accurate, but my goal was to talk both fairly and fiercely about what is going on right now, and the endless complexities of today.

RW: The Civil War looms over this play, starting in 1776 and leaving us just as the nation devolves into its bloodiest years. How do these two inflection points figure into the ideas of the play?

AP: Unfortunately, American history, like almost all human history, is mostly flawed human endeavours sandwiched between wars. One of the things I found hardest, saddest and most compelling when I wrote this play was seeing with more clarity than ever that the history of America is really the history of slavery. Slavery in America affected every aspect of American life, including power, politics and economics, from before the founding until the Civil War... and ever since as well.

RW: There is a deeply moving scene where Frederick Douglass asks JQA to imagine what his life would be like had he been born into the life Douglass knew as a black man and an enslaved person. Can you talk about that moment?

AP: It's such a simple and basic idea to imagine what your life would be like had you been born into radically different circumstances. On some level it is a more sophisticated version of the Golden Rule. I have an 8-year-old daughter and I find I am like, "Oh! On some level all I need to teach her is the Golden Rule." If you can actually teach the Golden Rule and get someone to live by it... it can be transformative.

RW: Can you talk a bit about the role of family in the play? I think that we often ascribe the behavior of our leaders to complications in their upbringing.

AP: Yes, I think that's right. As much as the play is about ideas it is also about family. I read a book [called] *Don't Think About an Elephant* and it posited a fascinating idea. We think of liberals as more maternal, more nurturing, and we consider conservatives more patriarchal, restrictive and distant. I think it is important to remember that JQA moved from a very stern, patriarchal family dynamic into one that was more maternal and loving when he married Louisa. And that shift in family dynamics is a source of tension in his personal and public life.

RW: You wrote the play ahead of the 2016 election. How do you think about the play and its future audiences now that we are on the verge of another historic election?

AP: This is a play I could probably write and re-write forever as the world continues to shift and evolve so rapidly around us. It evolved continually during the three years I was writing it, and if I were to enter fully back into it now, I am sure there are whole new scenes and issues I could engage with. There is never a lack of materials when you are writing about the complexities of politics and government in America.

ACT IV

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

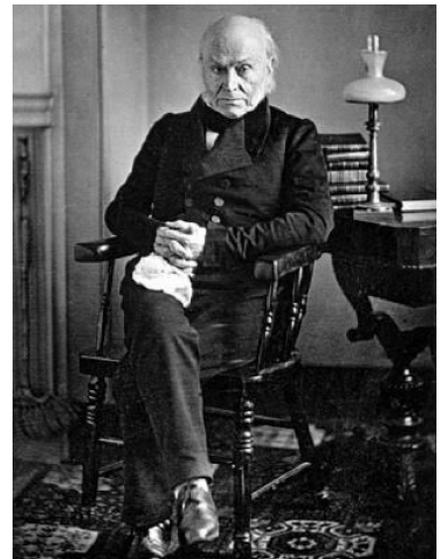
1. How did the set design aid in the telling of the story? What would you change and why?
2. What sort of atmosphere was created with the lighting, sound, and music?
3. What does the Gamm poster (also the cover of this study guide) tell you about the play? What sort of poster would you design for this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

WHO WAS JQA?

John Quincy Adams grew up in Massachusetts as a child of the American revolution. His father, John Adams, was the second president of the United States, who strongly shaped his oldest son, JQA, to pursue an educated life in politics.

JQA went on to become the secretary of state and the sixth president of the United States, after which he served sixteen years in congress. He was dubbed with the nickname of “Old Man Eloquent” for his extensive time in public service and his remarkable aptitude for poetics, literature, and the written word.

For sixty years, he kept a diligent journal of his personal experiences with the young American nation. However, his obsession with writing and the pressure to continue his father’s political legacy strained his relationship with his wife and children, two of which died as young adults due to preventative, arguably self-inflicted, means. In terms of his political stance, he leaned to the left, supporting welfare state, public education, and holding a stance against slavery as a “closet abolitionist”.



(Questions on next page)

Questions

- Before attending the Gamm’s production, what are your initial perceptions of JQA’s character?
- Had you ever heard of John Quincy Adams before now? What did you already know about him?
- When it comes to any historical figure, what type of information do you think is the most important to know (personal life, political views, written works, education, etc.)? Why?
- What questions about JQA do you hope to have answered in the Gamm’s play about him?
- Why would you care about JQA?

WHY NOW?

To present a play about a not-so-famous American political figure of two hundred years ago might seem like a strange choice, but the directors of the Gamm’s production, Tony Estrella and Tyler Dobrowsky, believe that now is the perfect time to show *JQA*. This play includes fictionalized, yet explicit, conversations about several political issues that we are currently dealing with in 2019, like political gridlock, fear mongering, racism, nepotism, and privilege. As several other sensationalized American history narratives have also gained social traction during the past few years, like the musical *Hamilton* or the movie *Lincoln*, this play about *JQA* rides the wave of our current interest in reviving and humanizing our historical figures.

Questions

- Consider your own cultural heritage, however you choose to identify it. If you were to choose a historical personality to revive in a play or movie at this moment in time, who would you choose? Why? What do you want your current community to understand about them and their contributions to modern society?
- What are some ways that we might modernize historical narratives? How do we make them more appealing to contemporary audiences? Why is it meaningful to represent history through creative lenses?
- Pick one element of the following list of topics discussed in *JQA*. With your own educational knowledge of American history, how has our national relationship to your chosen concept changed since the country’s inception? How has it remained the same? Can you identify key explanations for why things have shifted or remained the same? You are encouraged to provide research and evidence to defend your claim.
 - o Political gridlock
 - o Second amendment rights
 - o Nepotism
 - o Rule of law
 - o Government role in supporting Arts and Sciences

FUN FACT!

The Gamm's production of JQA is only the second time this play has ever been performed. The playwright, Aaron Posner, believes this play to be somewhat still in development. Over the course of the rehearsal process, the actors have been encouraged to experiment and share their ideas. In theatre, collaborating with the playwright is a rare and exciting opportunity!

PERSONAL / POLITICAL

Ever since Shakespeare wrote plays like *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, and all his other historical dramas, western theatre has been routinely preoccupied with the relationship between political life and personal life. As we read about history in a classroom setting, it's very easy only to remember someone's political views and their tangible contributions to society without ever getting a meaningful glimpse into their personal life's influence on their work. *JQA*, like many other artistic works about history, aims in part to bridge the gap between the personal and political. Family relations, the conflict between passion and duty, and the manifestation of interpersonal conflict are all central themes within this play. These conflicts remind us to keep an open mind about historical figures, the imperfections of politicians, and the inherent complexity of our own humanity.

Questions

- In your own words, what is the difference between the personal and the political? Think about your own relationship to a pertinent political issue and why you hold this belief. Compare your definitions of personal and political with a friend.
- Knowing they will go down in history, do you think that we hold our political representatives to different standards than common people? How do we judge them differently and why? Do you think this is fair, right, or good? Why or why not?
- Consider the following quote from the play spoken by JQA:

“My father, God rest his soul, was profoundly proud of himself, his friends, even his rivals... He was proud of the ‘indomitable American spirit’ that built this nation... But this pride led to a fierce sense of... personal identification with this country. In many ways, my father and his colleagues imagined they WERE the country”

Why would founding fathers like John Adams personally identify with their new country, assuming the American identity to be their own creation? What advantages did this have for their time? Why is this legacy of personal identification with one's nation problematic for future generations? Is this only an “American” issue?

 **ACTIVITY: BE A SET DESIGNER**

Set designers can always have a lot of fun with plays like *JQA* which mix history with modernity. While it can be a challenge to present historical accuracy in a flexible, theatrical setting, set designers always find ways to work with the demands of the script, the space, and the director. For the Gamm's production, the set is simple, with only a few chairs, a desk, some trunks, a dark blue floor, starry light bulbs built into the decor, and with the back wall made of burnt wood. These choices allow for colors which call upon the American flag, versatile set pieces which can move around easily to create new scenes, and costumes stored in the trunks to assist with actors playing multiple characters.

Create a sketch of your own set design idea for *JQA*. Consider the multiple factors needed to create a good theatre set like decor, furniture, entrances, and audience visibility. If you find you can't draw all of your ideas, feel free to label sections of your drawing, giving more information, or write out a list of important elements that are difficult to depict. Feel free to use the questions below to guide your design:

- Will different scenes need different sets? How do I make the transition between locations manageable?
- Will historical accuracy be important to me? Why or why not?
- When the actors move onstage with this set, will the audience be able to hear them and see them properly?
- How should the audience be positioned? How close to the stage should I allow them to be? Why?
- Do I want any elements to “fly in” during scene changes, dropping down from the space above the stage? What safety and logistics must be considered for this?
- How can I help make actors with quick costume changes have an easier time with their scene transitions?
- Are there creative ways that I want to build light, sound, or music into the set itself? How so?
- As a political play, *JQA* involves scenes with complicated power dynamics between characters. Can I build a “position of power” or a “position of weakness” onstage with the construction of my set? Do I want to?
- What color palette would I want to choose for this set? What type of wood, lights, paint, upholstery, etc.
- In theatres like the Gamm, the set designer often has a team to help with building the set. How many people would I need to build this set in two-three weeks?

ACT VI

EPILOGUE



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THANK YOU!

Thank you for joining us for *JQA* 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 *JQA*.

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. 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.



COMING SOON

JAN 16 - FEB 9



ADMISSIONS

BY JOSHUA HARMON | DIRECTED BY BRYN BOICE

Sherri Rosen-Mason, head of the admissions department at a New England prep school, is intent on diversifying the student body. Alongside her husband, the school's headmaster, she's been largely successful. But when the couple's only son sets his sights on an Ivy League university, progressive values and self-interest collide with shocking results. This biting comedy-drama by the author of *Bad Jews* and *Significant Other* explodes the ideals and contradictions of "liberal" white America.

GET YOUR TICKETS NOW AT GAMMTHEATRE.ORG