

recovery

by Greg MacArthur

a National Arts Centre English Theatre
World Premiere production

Study Guide

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This Study Guide was written, researched, and compiled by **Deborah James** for the National Arts Centre, English Theatre, March 2006. It may solely be used for educational purposes.

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Thirty Years Between Your Ears

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About This Guide

This Study Guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They may be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes.

Table of Contents	page(s)
Plot Synopsis	1
Characters and Themes	2
Activity 1: <i>recovery</i> and dystopia	3-4
A Checklist: Common Traits of Dystopian Fiction	4
Activity 2: <i>recovery</i> and the Playwright's Revision Process	5-10
Clare's monologue - Draft #3 (August 2004).	7-8
Clare's monologue - Draft #9 (February 2006).	9-10
Post Performance Discussion Questions	11
A Production Who's Who	12
Theatre Etiquette	13
Acknowledgements.....	14

ArtsAlive.ca

Have You Heard?

This NAC-hosted site has a wealth of educational resources available for teachers and students of music, English theatre, French theatre, and dance. It's well worth a visit.

<http://www.artsalive.ca>

Plot Synopsis (page 1 of 1)

In a not-too-distant future a highly addictive recreational drug of unknown origin becomes the thrill of choice for a large percentage of the global population. Though this drug with the distinctive logo appears to have no discernible side-effects, a massive public information campaign convinces people that its continued use will lead to disaster on an unprecedented scale. Users are deemed to be in the grip of an addiction that must be cured.

Vast recovery centres for thousands of patients are set up in far-flung locations, completely cut off from the outside world. So-called addicts are encouraged and/or compelled to put the rest of their lives on hold while they undergo expensive treatment regimes in these facilities. Three patients--Ben, Ash and Leroy--meet as dormitory mates who share the same bathroom in one such facility in Antarctica. The treatment they receive, nightly inhalation of a bluish vapour administered through the ventilation system, induces distressing physical and mental symptoms: headaches, diarrhea, dizziness, memory loss, apathy, a sense of detachment from the self and the world, and a chilling inability to recognize loved ones/family members.

Conditions in the recovery centre are quite comfortable at first but gradually deteriorate until the place resembles a filthy, overcrowded penal colony. Insufficient food, forced labour tricked up as a “work reward program”, and sudden, ominous disappearances become the norm. As their quality of life spirals downward, Ben is able to perform the mental gymnastics that allow him to accept as truth the vague reassurances offered by centre employee Clare. Ash isolates himself in the observatory and becomes obsessed with the penguins and the lost boy he can see out on the ice through a telescope. Leroy protests against the dehumanizing treatment, engaging in a forbidden relationship with centre employee Mya and becoming involved with a group of rebels.

Work is completed on the new triple-capacity recovery centre called the Complex. The rotating figurehead at the top of the new building is the same as the logo associated with the mysterious drug that precipitated the addiction panic. As Ben conducts an orchestra of emaciated children and Mya works the outdoor oyster bar, Clare crosses paths with her lost 12-year-old son, Alex. Mother and son are no longer able to recognize each other.

Characters and Themes (page 1 of 1)

Ben is a professional musician in his 30s who teaches violin and plays in a chamber music ensemble. He is persuaded to check himself in to the recovery centre by his elderly mother. Repressed and self-conscious, Ben shies away from confrontation, seeks approval from authority figures, and wants to fit in.

Clare is a recovery centre supervisor in her 30s who once worked at a spa. She has a twelve-year-old son named Alex. Her evasive non-answers and calculated positivity disempower patients and keep them in the dark about the true nature of the treatment they are receiving. Grief over her son's disappearance shakes Clare out of her complacency until she, too, falls victim to the Complex and its soul-destroying treatment.

Ash is a skilled woodworker in his 60s who owns his own furniture design and manufacturing company. Gregarious, pleasure-loving, and adventurous, Ash checks himself in for treatment in solidarity with his two best friends. He copes with the deprivations of the recovery centre by retreating to the observatory and immersing himself in the study of the penguin colony and its surprise guest, a lost boy.

Leroy is Dutch, 24 years old, and writes reviews for a European music magazine as an intern. He has been coerced into treatment for his own good by his tightly-knit family. A stubbornly individualistic loner, Leroy is blunt and confrontational at times. He quickly sees through the manipulations and lies in the recovery centre and strives to resist the treatment as long as he can. He has a relationship with centre employee Mya.

Mya works in food preparation at the recovery centre. She is in her 20s. She breaks the rules by having an affair with Leroy. Through him she comes to associate with a rebel cell within the Complex, but her flirtation with resistance is short-lived. The conclusion of her affair with Leroy calls the sincerity of her affections and motives into question.

Alex is Clare's 12-year-old son. He appears for the first time at the end of the play.

recovery is a richly allusive and evocative work. As such, its **thematic** range is enormous. Dominant preoccupations include:-

- the suppression of individuality in the face of conformity, consumerism, and the pursuit of comfort at any cost;
- the abdication of personal responsibility inherent in the victim stance;
- the compulsion to self-medicate as a way of coping with the pace and pressures of life in contemporary society;
- the loss of childhood, memory, and the breakdown of the family;
- the disinformation, thought control, and false-needs generation in marketing and mass media;
- the blinkered vision of middle class neurosis with its fixation on personal concerns and its obliviousness to the degradation of the environment and the real suffering of others.

Activity 1: recovery and dystopia (page 1 of 2)

Certain aspects of *recovery* are likely to seem eerily familiar to students who've studied dystopian works such as George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or who've seen movies like *Brazil* or *The Matrix*. As soon as possible after viewing *recovery*, give your students the background materials below and have them conduct an informal analysis of Greg MacArthur's play (in groups or individually) to determine how closely it conforms to the dystopian model.

Background

The word "dystopia" was derived from the Greek *dys* ("bad" or "negative") and *topos* ("place"). It was coined in late 19th century England to contrast "utopia", a word created by Sir Thomas More in 1518 to describe an ideal place or society [*eu* ("good") + *topos* ("place")].

In cultural terms, a dystopia is a fictional society usually portrayed as existing in a future time where the conditions of life are extremely bad due to deprivation, oppression, or terror. Science fiction--particularly post-apocalyptic science fiction and cyberpunk--often feature dystopias. In most dystopian fiction, a corrupt government creates or sustains the poor quality of life, often conditioning the masses to believe the society is proper and just, even perfect. Most dystopian fiction takes place in the future but often purposely incorporates contemporary social trends taken to extremes. Dystopias are frequently written as warnings or satires showing current trends extrapolated to a nightmarish conclusion.

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Questions

1. In the play, what are the specific ways in which the world is described as a "bad place"? Consider both the "normal" world outside of the recovery centre and life on the inside.
2. Who is ultimately responsible for the poor quality of life patients in recovery experience? Should the patients themselves be held responsible for what happens to them? Why or why not?
3. Give three examples of conditioning techniques used at the recovery centre in an effort to convince patients that everything they are subjected to is normal and beneficial.
4. What current social trends taken to nightmarish extremes are essential to the action in the play?

Activity 1: recovery and dystopia (page 2 of 2)

A Checklist: Common Traits of Dystopian Fiction

Put a check mark in front of each trait you can identify in the play. Be prepared to explain your choices with specific examples.

_____ a hierarchical society where divisions between the upper, middle, and lower classes are definitive and unbending (Caste system).

_____ a nation-state ruled by an upper class with few democratic ideals.

_____ widespread propaganda programs and educational systems that coerce most citizens into worshipping the state and its government in an attempt to convince them into thinking that life under the regime is good and just.

_____ strict conformity among citizens and the general assumption that dissent and individuality are bad.

_____ a fictional state figurehead that people worship fanatically through a vast personality cult, such as *1984*'s Big Brother.

_____ a fear or disgust of the world outside the state.

_____ a common view of traditional life, particularly organized religion, as primitive and nonsensical.

_____ a penal system that lacks due process laws and often employs psychological or physical torture.

_____ constant surveillance by state police agencies.

_____ the banishment of the natural world from daily life.

_____ a backstory of a natural disaster, war, revolution, uprising, spike in overpopulation or some other climactic event which resulted in dramatic changes to society.

_____ a protagonist who questions the society, often feeling intrinsically that something is terribly wrong.

_____ technological advancements far in advance of contemporary society.
(Adapted from a Wikipedia article, reprinted here under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License)

Activity 2: *recovery* and the Playwright's Revision Process (page 1 of 6)

"When I think back to the seeds of *recovery* over three years ago, it's fascinating to see what the play has become: from a small, specific image, an entire world. I have thrown out a novel's worth of material—thousands of words, a few characters, a few story lines. I have lived in different cities, worked at different jobs, lost friends, made friends. Every experience, every conversation, every environment has fed into the play." (excerpted from *How Greg MacArthur writes a play* written by Diana Tyndale, February 06, Stages)

The script development process in the professional theatre requires playwrights to sustain their commitment and creative enthusiasm over an extended period time, often years, while the text is revised and refined. The rehearsal process for *recovery* begins with the playwright's tenth draft--which will likely be revised again in collaboration with the actors and director.

Procedure: Either before or after viewing *recovery*, have students compare and contrast the August 2004 version of the scene with the February 2006 version, both of which are reprinted in this Guide with the permission of the playwright. Ask students to speculate on the playwright's reasons for the revisions. How is the more recent version an improvement on the earlier one? After they've had some time to second-guess Greg MacArthur's underlying purpose in the revision, take up his detailed explanation below.

Playwright's Comments on Draft #3

"In the first couple of drafts, Clare's son did not go missing. This plot point was a development that I added in draft #3. Clare's original role in the play was to be 'the face' of the recovery centre – the human voice behind the machine. However, as I continued to work on the piece and to develop the characters' arcs, I found that Clare was becoming too one-dimensional. I didn't feel that her character developed or changed in any significant way, particularly in comparison to the others. I wanted to give her a richer life, to help her become more integral to the action of the story.

"One of the major images in the play is children. While writing the play, I kept seeing armies of lost children wandering throughout as a backdrop to the action. This inspired my decision to have Clare's child taken away from her. This gives her character much more of an emotional presence in the play, making her much more sympathetic. Clare is a part of the Complex, but she also becomes its victim. The situation I created with this event also allowed me to explore the nature of what exactly happens to the 'patients'. We get the opportunity to witness Clare going through the treatment, which allows the audience more insight into exactly what is going on/what the intentions of the Complex are.

"The ambiguity surrounding the loss of Clare's son Alex is important to me. I didn't ever want to know precisely what happened to him. I wanted to leave it open-ended, so the audience could extrapolate for themselves--leave them with questions, not answers.

"I was quite happy with this new development. It created a nice dynamic tension - particularly between Clare and Ben - and Clare's character became far more human, vulnerable and playable. As well, the specific loss of a child in the play was a strong action, which reflected one of the major themes in the work – the loss of self, the loss of memory and childhood."

Activity 2: *recovery* and the Playwright's Revision Process

(page 2 of 6)

Playwright's Comments on Draft #9

"In refining the scene, I felt that I had included too much specific information about the treatment process. On the notion of ambiguity again, it is important, particularly in a work of speculative fiction such as this, to give enough information to the audience so that they don't feel lost or confused; but it's also to leave things slightly ambiguous so as not to answer everything for them. It's better, I believe, to leave them wanting to know more.

"I realized it was less important to me that the audience know how the treatment was administered; it was more important for me to know why the treatment was administered. Thus, I got rid of the specifics of how it was done and focused the scene more on the intentions behind the treatment.

"I was particularly happy when I came up with the idea of referring to the residents by their 'animal' names. This reinforced the thematic resonance of the images of gulag* camps, which were named in a similar fashion, with sweet sounding animal monikers.

"I am sure once we – the director and the actors – begin working on this piece specifically and see how it fits in relation to the overall structure and arc of both the story and of the character - things may shift. I may be able to edit a bit more. (It's important for me to get the scenes down to the bare essentials – to strip it of excess.) The information one can glean from the rehearsal process – as opposed to the writing process – is invaluable.

"Likewise, things may shift when I see the work on stage in front of an audience. A play is a living thing. It exists for an audience. When I see the work in performance, I may learn even more about this specific scene – and about the entire play."

***gulag:** A system of forced labour and detention camps established in the northern most reaches of Soviet Russia. The gulags were known for their harsh conditions; prisoners routinely died from over-work, starvation, and abusive treatment. Millions of Russian citizens were imprisoned in the gulags during the rule of Joseph Stalin.

Activity 2: recovery and the Playwright's Revision Process (page 3 of 6)

Clare's monologue - Draft #3 (August 2004) (with the permission of the playwright)

CLARE: The two Japanese teenagers put me in a small room with a basin and a toilet.

I sat on a plastic chair.

I had never been in this room before.

I later found out this was the Welcome Room, the room Residents were brought to when they first arrived.

Where they were introduced to their new surroundings.

Two men came into the room.

One of them I recognized.

One of them I didn't.

The one I recognized gave me a glass of water.

He said to me

CLARE WE LIKE YOU

YOU'RE A VALUABLE MEMBER OF THIS FACILITY

WE WANT TO HELP YOU THROUGH THIS DIFFICULT TIME

BUT WE CAN'T HAVE YOU WANDERING AROUND

MESSING WITH RESIDENTS

SNEAKING INTO ROOMS

INTO FORBIDDEN AREAS

IT'S NOT SAFE

WE DON'T NORMALLY –

I MEAN THIS ISN'T STANDARD –

The one I didn't recognize left the room.

I'M GOING TO LET YOU IN ON SOMETHING BECAUSE I TRUST YOU AND I WANT TO HELP YOU

I'M GOING TO LET YOU IN ON THE NATURE OF OUR WORK HERE

ON OUR TREATMENT

HOW WE HELP THESE ADDICTS

HOW WE CAN HELP YOU

I finished my glass of water and I didn't know what to do with the empty glass and so I placed it beside my chair.

THE VENTILATION PROCESS

I was suddenly worried I might knock the glass over with my feet and so I placed the glass directly under my chair.

Activity 2: recovery and the Playwright's Revision Process (page 4 of 6)

Clare's monologue - Draft #3 (August 2004) (continued)

WHAT WE DO
WHAT IT DOES IS
THE AIR IS INHALED
IT TRAVELS THROUGH THE NASAL CAVITY AND IS DRAWN INTO THE BLOOD
AND INTO THE BRAIN
TO THE PART OF THE BRAIN WITH THE MOST HEATED ACTIVITY

THAT IS
IT IS DRAWN TO THE AREA OF THE BRAIN WITH THE STRONGEST IMPULSE
THE STRONGEST PULL
THE STRONGEST CRAVING
AND IT KILLS THAT PARTICULAR CRAVING
IT ERASES THE MEMORY
THE FEELING
AND THE JOY
OF THAT CRAVING
IT ALSO ERASES OTHER THINGS
INCIDENTAL THINGS
OTHER MEMORIES
CERTAIN URGES
WE'RE STILL REFINING IT
BUT THE FACT REMAINS
THE CRAVING WILL DISAPPEAR
FOR THE PRODUCT
OR
IN YOUR CASE
FOR YOUR SON

He reached down and picked up the glass from under my chair.

SOME PEOPLE EXPERIENCE OTHER SIDE EFFECTS
BY THE LOOK OF YOUR FOREARMS AND SHOULDERS YOU SEEM FIT AND HEALTHY

He smiled and squeezed my arm.
He left the room.
The door shut.
There was a clicking sound.
A large air vent opened above me.

I thought of my son.
Strangely, I thought of him playing the violin.
I thought of him, floating away on a piece of ice, sitting on a small wooden chair,
playing the violin.

That was one of the last thoughts or images I ever had of him.

Activity 2: recovery and the Playwright's Revision Process

(page 5 of 6)

Clare's monologue - Draft #9 (February 2006) (with the permission of the playwright)

CLARE: They take me to a room with a small window, a steel basin and a toilet.

I've never been in this room before.
They tie me to a plastic chair.
Two men come into the room.
One man gives me a glass of water.
The other man says

CLARE WE LIKE YOU
YOU'RE A VALUABLE MEMBER OF THIS FACILITY
BUT WE CAN'T HAVE YOU SNEAKING AROUND
INTERFERING WITH RESIDENTS
ASKING QUESTIONS
IT'S NOT SAFE

The man who gave me the glass of water leaves the room.
The other man continues talking.

WE'RE GOING TO HELP YOU THROUGH THIS DIFFICULT TIME

I finish my glass of water but I don't know what to do with the empty glass and so I put it beside my chair.

I suddenly worry that I might knock the glass over with my feet and so I put the glass directly under my chair.

The man crouches down in front of my face.

GOOD THINGS ARE HAPPENING HERE
AND YOU'RE A PART OF IT
OF COURSE WE HAD SOME PROBLEMS WITH THE RABBITS AND THE PANDAS
EARLY ON BUT WE FIXED THAT
THE SWANS ARE COMPLETELY NON-SEXUAL
THE BILLYGOATS AND THE COYOTES ARE BECOMING MORE AND MORE
TRUSTING
THE SALAMANDERS HAVE NO IMPULSES AND THE WOODPECKERS REMEMBER
ONLY WHAT WE WANT THEM TO REMEMBER
CHILDREN AND OLD PEOPLE ARE STILL GIVING US SOME PROBLEMS
BUT YOU KNOW CHILDREN AND OLD PEOPLE
THEY FALL APART AT THE DROP OF A HAT
PEOPLE
THEIR MINDS
THE FINAL FRONTIER
THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

Activity 2: *recovery* and the Playwright's Revision Process

(page 6 of 6)

Clare's monologue - Draft #9 (February 2006) (continued)

The man smiles and squeezes my shoulders.

YOU'RE A STRONG HEALTHY WOMAN SO I WOULDN'T WORRY

He reaches down and picks up the glass from under my chair.

He leaves the room.

The door locks.

There' s a clicking sound.

Large air vents open all around me - in the walls, in the ceiling,
under my feet.

I turn my head.

Outside the small window I see something moving out on the ice.

Post Performance Discussion Questions (page 1 of 1)

1. A quotation from the introduction to recovery connects the play to the literary form known as allegory. An allegory is a work in “prose or verse in which the objects, events or people are presented symbolically, so that the story conveys a meaning other than and deeper than the actual incident or characters described. Often, the form is used to teach a moral lesson.”

[library.thinkquest.org/23846/library/terms/].

What issues/events/concerns inform the deeper meaning of recovery? Do you think the playwright is attempting to teach a moral lesson through his play? How would you summarize the play’s overall message?

2. Repeated references to celebrities, artists, performers and cultural products--from the world of high art and from popular culture--create a kind of motif in *recovery*. (Ute Lemper; *Bad, Bad Leroy Brown*; Vivaldi; John Stamos; Sting; *The Turning Point*, etc.). What function is served by these frequent allusions to the world outside of the play? What effect does recognition of these references (or the lack of it) have on the audience/character/actor relationship?

3. Greg MacArthur’s treatment of the spoken word in the play is very different from the back-and-forth conversations that carry the meaning and further the plot in more conventional plays. Dialogue scenes here are interspersed with passages where the characters address the audience directly. These passages are often sharply juxtaposed against the speeches of other characters, who carry on the narrative from their own distinct points of view. Why do you think this choice was made? Is it effective?

4. The dreamlike, ultimately nightmarish atmosphere of *recovery* is a dominant feature of the work. How does each of the following elements of the production contribute to the creation of atmosphere: lighting/projections; sound/music; imagery; set/props; acting style (direct address monologues/movement, blocking, and stage business)?

A Production Who's Who

CREATIVE TEAM

Playwright	Greg MacArthur
Director	David Oiye
Set and Costume Designer	Kim Nielsen
Lighting Designer	David Fraser
Composer and Sound Designer	Robert Perrault

CAST

Clare	Kate Hurman
Ash	John Koensgen
Leroy	Jeff Lawson
Ben	Ian Leung
Mya	Alix Sideris
Alexander	Paul Wernick

STAGE MANAGEMENT TEAM

Stage Manager	Stéfanie Séguin
Apprentice Stage Manager	Tina Goralski

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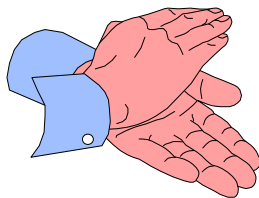
*The playwright acknowledges the assistance of
the 2004 Banff playRites Colony – a collaboration between
the Canada Council for the Arts, The Banff Centre for the Arts,
and Alberta Theatre Projects*



Theatre Etiquette

Please take a moment to prepare the students for their visit to the National Arts Centre by explaining good **Theatre Etiquette** which will enhance the enjoyment of the play by all audience members:

1. *recovery* will be performed in the Studio of the NAC. Matinées at the NAC are for students and the general public. It is important for everyone to be quiet (no talking or rustling of materials) during the performance so others do not lose their immersion in the “world of the play”. Unlike movies, the actors in live theatre can hear disturbances in the audience and will give their best performances when they feel the positive involvement of the audience members. The appropriate way of showing approval for the actors’ performances is through laughter and applause. For the enjoyment of all, people who disturb others during the show may be asked to leave the Studio.
2. It is important that there be no electronic devices used in the Theatre so that the atmosphere of the play is not interrupted and others are not disturbed. Cell phones, pagers and anything that beeps must be turned off. Cameras and all other recording devices are not permitted in the Studio.
3. You will be seeing *recovery* in the Studio of the NAC. Unlike Southam Hall or the Theatre, seating is unassigned so ushers may assist in showing patrons to their seats.
4. Information on the artists who put this production together can be found in this Study Guide for those who wish to write a review.
5. It is important to make a trip to the washroom before the play starts. Anyone leaving while the play is in progress may unfortunately not be allowed back into the Studio.





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