

Written on Water

by Michel Marc Bouchard
translated by Linda Gaboriau

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Study Guide

THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES
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About This Guide

Portions of this study guide are formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They may be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. Here is an outline of the contents of each page with suggestions on how it may be used.

The Section Titled

May Be Used To

Written on Water in Context
-- Floods, Real and Symbolic
(one page)

Give historical/intellectual context for the play

Plot Synopsis – summary of the play
(one page)

Outline the story with a class

Character Sketches – one-page hand-out on the characters

Familiarize students with the characters in the play

Suggested Pre-Show Activities
(three pages)

Introduce students to the language and themes

Suggested Post-Show Activities
(one page)

Provide ideas for follow up in the classroom

Interview with Designer Judith Bowden
(two pages)

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A Production Who's Who (one page)

Aid students writing reviews

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Link to online interviews and information

Additional Resources (one page)

Extend learning possibilities

Teacher Resource Page #1
(one page)

For use with pre-show exercise #1 on **maxims**

Teacher Resource Page #2
(one page)

For use with pre-show exercise #2 on **images**

Written on Water in Context: Floods, Real and Symbolic

Michel Marc Bouchard now lives in Montreal but was born and raised in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region of Quebec. It's quite likely close relatives of his lived through one of the worst natural disasters in Canadian history -- the severe flooding that devastated the region in July of 1996.

Heavy rains combined with weaknesses in the local system of dams and the natural physical geography of the region to produce mud slides and raging torrents of water. When the waters subsided, 10 people were dead, 15,000 had been forced to evacuate, and 250 homes had been destroyed. Roads, bridges and train tracks had been washed away; the hardest hit areas were only accessible by air. The flooding resulted in an estimated \$365 million in damages.*

While the **historical fact** of the Saguenay flood may have provided the germ of the idea for *Written on Water*, Bouchard's play offers a highly stylized and poetic interpretation of it that draws on the value of the flood as a **symbol**. Many cultures throughout history have told and re-told stories about a great flood, often sent by an angry deity to destroy a wicked civilization, purifying the earth and offering the survivors a chance at a fresh start.** Bouchard has the character Danny-the-Lonely-Child refer specifically to the Biblical story of Noah in his closing monologue. The "Author's Note" to *Written on Water* spells out the many layers of meaning Bouchard associates with the flood: *"The flood is a complex metaphor that represents the end of one world and the beginning of another. The flood ... represents the devastating waves of homogenization, social conformity and globalization that dictate our lives and serve to standardize specific cultures and make collective memories seem like suspect acts, even acts of terrorism. The flood is an oppressive trend of 'Young is beautiful', a trend where the elderly are seen by men and women in suits as only fit to occupy prefabricated territories ... Our cultures and memories are like ... these seniors who are struggling against inevitable extinction."*

*A wealth of detailed information on the Saguenay flood -- including downloadable handouts and lesson plans -- can be found on the excellent CBC Archives site at

http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-70-95/disasters_tragedies%20saguenay_flood/

**For extensive background on the myth of the great flood in cultures around the globe visit *Encyclopedia Mythica* at http://www.pantheon.org/articles/f/flood_myths.html

Written on Water -- Plot Synopsis

In the aftermath of a flood that has destroyed most of their village, Samuel, his sister Martha, her friend and secret lover Claire, and the spouses William and Dorothy -- all elderly members of a writing group -- grapple with the losses of the past and the opening up of new possibilities for the future while trying to salvage what remains of their written work.

Before the flood the characters struggled to cope with the aftermath of a different kind of disaster, the social and cultural disaster caused by the mass exodus of their grown-up children*, who have left their village and their families to pursue the high-paying jobs and greater personal freedoms of life in the city. Danny-the-Lonely-Child, the sole young adult who refused to leave, bears witness to the old way of life that has shaped the main characters but is soon to be only a memory.

The crisis posed by the flood and the sudden return of the 20-something generation to offer their help in the relief effort brings deep psychic wounds to the surface in the central characters; healing comes for those who can envision a place for themselves in a new future and accept the inevitability of change.

As director Micheline Chevrier has observed, *“Michel Marc's world is anchored in the rural geography of Canada. Yet it's a magical, incredibly evocative and totally recognizable place for any audience. There's always a wilderness of some sort, and in the middle of it he puts average characters who speak a heightened, poetic language. Their speech is almost operatic in its ideas and raw emotions.”*

*Some 80 percent of Quebec's population lives in its urban areas, with approximately half in the Montreal metropolitan area.

Written on Water -- Character Sketches

Samuel is a retired high school teacher in his 70s. His wife's name is Helen. His own children have moved to the city. After a period of intense disagreement between husband and wife -- culminating in an act of physical violence -- Helen, too, relocates to be closer to their children. She dies before the couple has a chance to reconcile. His unmarried sister Martha is his last surviving family member in the village.

Samuel is the founding member and leader of the writers group. He feels driven to document the past life of the village and its people for posterity, both as an act of defiance against the forces of consumerism and conformity that have quietly obliterated his small-town way of life, and as a way to manage his grief and rage at the personal betrayal he feels his wife and children have inflicted upon him by leaving. His powerful, dominating presence and absolute faith in his own opinions stirs up both admiration and rebelliousness in the other group members.

Martha is a member of the writing group. She is younger by a few years than her brother Samuel. She has never married and has no children. She has a close and loving relationship with Samuel despite his controlling personality. She keeps her sexual orientation and the full details of her relationship with Claire a secret from him and the village community at large, fearing their judgment and condemnation. Her cat dies in the flood and winds up in Claire's handbag.

Claire is a widow in her 70s with a grown daughter who lives in the city. She is a member of the writing group with a special interest in collecting maxims, proverbs and adages. She loves Martha and wants to move to the city with her. There they would be free to live together without needing to worry about what other people think of them. She finds Martha's dead cat after the flood and struggles with how to break the news to her.

William is in his 70s, a member of the writing circle and Dorothy's husband. Their home has been destroyed in the flood and the couple wants to use the insurance money they will receive in compensation to buy a seniors condo in the city where they can be close to their children and grandchildren. They need Samuel's signature on some legal documents before they can proceed. William resents Samuel's contempt for his choices and resists his insistence that he focus on trying to recreate the past.

Dorothy is in her 70s, a member of the writing circle, and William's wife. Her writing reveals her preoccupation with fashion, beauty, and material things. Samuel ridicules her for mindlessly following the trends of a youth-worshipping and corrupt consumer culture. Dorothy fights against being robbed of her sense of herself by refusing to turn herself into a stereotypically sexless and matronly old lady.

Danny-the-Lonely-Child is a young man in his 20s, the only member of the younger generation who has not left the village. He often appears on stage with feathered wings. He is obsessed with the output and proceedings of the writing group and can relate whole texts word for word, idiot savant style, but sometimes applies his special kind of corrective vision to past events, transforming them into something ideal and essential. He longs to be accepted by Samuel as a member of the writing group and will become the real repository of the collective memory of the village. Symbolically he represents a kind of artist figure, building bridges between real and idealized worlds.

***Written on Water* -- Suggested Pre-Show Activities** (page 1 of 3)

1. Maxims -- Mix and Match

Focus:

- a quick introduction to one aspect of the text of *Written on Water*
- speculating on what the characters' collections and preoccupations might suggest about their personalities

A **maxim** is a universal truth or rule for conduct expressed in a single sentence. The character Claire in *Written on Water* is known for the extensive collection of maxims she has committed to memory. Several maxims from her collection appear on **Teacher Resource Page #1** herein ready for photocopying.

Give every student in your group **half** a maxim and let them wander around the room in search of their missing half. When all the maxims have been reassembled, group together the pairs with the same maxim and give them ten minutes to come up with short improvised scene illustrating it.

After these performances, lead the class in a brainstorming session on other sayings, proverbs and adages they know and list them on the board. Solicit opinions as to why this is such an enduring literary form -- what underlying human needs does it meet? What kind of person would be so interested in maxims that he/she collects them?

***Written on Water* -- Suggested Pre-Show Activities** (page 2 of 3)

2. Connecting with Imagery

Focus: -exploring the power of Michel Marc Bouchard's poetic language
 -making personal associations with specific images from
 Written on Water

It is possible for students to work individually, in pairs or in small groups on this activity as long as there is at least one person for each of the fifteen images on listed on **Teacher Resource Page #2** herein. Explain to your group that you want them to contemplate and develop a creative response to an image you will assign to them at random. Stress that the image is a jumping off point for their own personal explorations; there is no right or wrong way to respond, but they will need to produce something they are comfortable sharing with the group at the end of the process.

Depending on your classroom subject and resources, responses could take any or all of the following forms: written (eg. free association/stream of consciousness or as the starting point for a poem of their own); visual (eg. a sketch or collage); kinesthetic (eg. a movement piece or tableau); musical (eg. a song or instrumental composition); or dramatic (eg. characters acting and reacting on stage). It's probably best to ask students to commit themselves to a form in which they prefer to respond before they receive the images so they can pair off with creatures of like mind.

When you have fifteen working units in place, assign a numbered image to each one and start the clock -- a period for exploration and creation and a period for sharing/performance would be ideal. When each of the personal responses and corresponding images has been presented, try this: designate students to read aloud each image in order, as if they were separate lines from the same poem. How does experiencing their image as a part of a greater whole change their response to it?

***Written on Water* -- Suggested Pre-Show Activities** (page 3 of 3)

3. Family Photo Album

Focus: -to get inside the experience of the characters in a hands-on way
 -to collaborate on a creative project in a larger group

Split your class into two groups of roughly equal size. Each group is to become a close and loving family unit – say the Merciers and the Paquettes -- living in the Lac-Saint-Jean region in the 1950s. Each group must work together to plan both a family tree and a series of 10 tableaux representing photographs that span the next five decades in the life of each clan. Weddings, funerals, formal family portraits, birthdays and other special occasions and ceremonies are likely to figure prominently.

At the halfway point at the end of tableau 5, instruct each group that everyone 25 years of age and younger has now moved away from the region. Have them decide on a special object the younger generation will bring with them -- a shawl or a hand-made carving, for example -- to symbolize the missing family members in the final 5 tableaux. A letter or personal note to accompany each of these “photos” can be read aloud as voice-over text while the images are performed.

***Written on Water* -- Suggested Post-Show Activities**

1. Docudrama on a Disaster

Focus: -researching and building a drama around a famous Canadian disaster
-editing documentary material and learning various ways to convey it dramatically

Using the CBC Archives site listed on the Resources page of this study guide, choose a Canadian disaster and make it the focus of a classroom unit on docudrama. A clear and detailed description of how to approach a project of this scope is given in Booth and Lundy's invaluable

Interpretation: Working with Scripts (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich: Toronto, 1983, pp.106-114).

2. Talking Points on Central Themes/Conflicts

Focus: -to stimulate class discussion

Theme: death of the old/birth of the new

Of what value is the way of life Samuel represents and seeks to preserve? How might small town life in rural Quebec have been superior to life as it is being lived by the city-dwelling younger generation? What aspects of small town life are better left in the past?

Theme: individuality/conformity

When does it make sense to abandon a position one has been passionately attached to and "go with the flow"? Is Samuel a hero for holding on to his principles? Are the other members of the writing group cowards for choosing to leave? Is Dorothy foolish for wanting hair extensions and a nipple ring or admirable in her refusal to conform?

3. The Designer's Art

Focus: -understanding the complexity of the designer's art

Have your group read the interview with designer Judith Bowden herein as a prelude to discussion of how set and costume design in *Written on Water*. How did the design elements work to further understanding and/or appreciation of the play?

Written on Water -- Interview with Set and Costume Designer Judith Bowden (page 1 of 2)

Ms. Bowden has been a professional set and costume designer for over ten years. Her first work at the NAC was on The 'Vaudevilles' of Chekhov in May of 2003. Selected design credits include Rice Boy for CanStage (Toronto); Afterplay for the Shaw Festival (Niagara-on-the-Lake); Cabaret for Theatre Calgary; and numerous projects during her longstanding association as a freelance designer with Alberta Theatre Projects.

What is the greatest challenge you faced as costume and set designer on this show?

"The poetic qualities of Written on Water presented a unique design challenge for me. The power of the written word to create images that take us out of our concrete world is a central theme of the piece. But as a designer charged with creating key elements of the visual impact of the production, I felt I needed to resist the desire to simply illustrate the poetic images Michel Marc Bouchard evokes with his words.

"To make the text work onstage we felt the stories told by the characters had to be supported - but not over explained or made too literal -- by the visuals. For example, the show opens with a description of the storm and flood; the set design shows the aftermath and hints at the storm with lightening and a sky filled with clouds. All the scenes essentially stay in the framework of the writing room for the same reason."

What sources did you draw on for inspiration?

"In the play the writing group meets in a school gymnasium that gets severely damaged in the flooding. I looked at lots of pictures of flood ravaged houses and then at old school gyms. I was drawn to the idea of the gym as a symbol of youth that then is ravaged by natural elements -- it created a nice parallel with the ideas in the play about coming to terms with aging, something all the characters need to deal with in various ways."

How did you settle on the best colours to use in your designs for Written on Water?

"The director and I settled on a very simple colour palette inspired by expanses of land and sky. We wanted a sense of theatricality in our depiction of the sky -- an abstracted, expressionistic quality. We wanted the audience to be able to feel the weight of the sky and also to allow for the possibility of the clouds being 'read' in a way that recalls the flood waters and the totality of the ever-moving forces that threaten to engulf the characters."

How realistic is the set design?

"We wanted to work with the idea that the writing room in the gym was a kind of island surrounded by water, so in a theatrical sense we have let the set float in the theatre box. While it isn't exactly naturalistic, the gym does have all the detail and texture of a ravaged room. The shapes become more and more simplified as the line of vision moves upstage. The texture becomes more 'painted' and less 3-dimensional."

... continued

Written on Water -- Interview with Set and Costume Designer Judith Bowden (page 2 of 2)

Designers and directors normally work very closely together. Could you summarize the process you've been through on this show?

“Written on Water was a difficult play to come to terms with because it can be interpreted on so many different levels. As well the clues I would usually use as a spring board for the design were not necessarily clear cut. While this allows for a great deal of creative freedom, it can become daunting.

“For example, the play gives very little information about the background of the characters -- how wealthy they are, what their occupations may have been, how they lived before the flood, etc. This is the kind of information I would normally use to design the costumes. I worked it out with the input of the actors and the director because we all needed to agree on who these people were and make them as real as possible.

“On the set design, I collaborated with the director and lighting designer to find a way of always keeping the action in the one room and still suggest a more abstract space at times. Director Micheline Chevrier and I went through at least three designs before settling on the one you will see onstage. We remained committed to our original idea of not over illustrating the writing with the visuals, striving to allow a kind of seamless movement from scene to scene that didn't require changing scenery or using theatre magic. We wanted to let the words do the magic.

“So even though we've worked together often on other shows and communicate very well, on this particular show we needed to see a model of each design to figure out if it was really what we were after.”

How did you discover theatre design as a career? What early experiences sparked your interest in pursuing work in this field?

“I saw lots of theatre growing up, but it only dawned on me in my 20s that it was possible to work as a designer in the theatre, so I went to university to study set, lighting and costume design. I've always been interested in painting, drawing and sewing. I was designing the clothes I had sketched and painted when I realized that what I was doing was well suited to theatre.

“When I think back on it I was constantly doing research into different periods in history -- events or art movements -- and using that as my inspiration. I think I naturally crave a story as a starting point for my own work. That's what I love most about the theatre -- working to bring a story to life, doing the detective work of the research and pinpointing the themes of a play. That's just as interesting to me as sitting down with my paints.”

***Written on Water* -- A Production Who's Who**

The play *Les Manuscrits du déluge* premiered in February 2003 at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (Montreal).

Written on Water was commissioned and developed by the Canadian Stage Company (aka CanStage) (Toronto) and the Melbourne Festival (Australia). CanStage and the National Arts Centre (Ottawa) are co-producing this English-language premiere. The collaborative efforts of many people have been involved, including:

CREATIVE TEAM

Playwright	Michel Marc Bouchard
Translator	Linda Gaboriau
Director	Micheline Chevrier
Set/Costume Design	Judith Bowden
Lighting Design	Ereca Hassell
Original Music/Sound Design	Marc Desormeaux
Movement Director	Jo Leslie

CAST

Claire	Doris Chillcott
Samuel	David Fox
William	Jerry Franken
Dorothy	Barbara Gordon
Martha	Carolyn Hetherington
Danny-the-Lonely-Child	Jordan Pettle

STAGE MANAGEMENT TEAM

Stage Manager	Lauren Snell
Assistant Stage Manager	Stéphanie Séguin

***Written on Water* -- Virtual Classroom**

Recommended online resources with detailed information on several aspects of the production are offered below.

Bouchard biographies:

The Ottawa Public Libraries Electronic Information Page at the Gale Group's Infotrack site has several pages on Michel Marc Bouchard, including an outline of his personal information, career, writings, media adaptations of his work, sidelights, and suggestions for further reading. Please note that you need a valid OPL library card to access this site.

The Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia has a page on Bouchard at the following address:
<http://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Bouchard%2C%20Michel%20Marc>

Online Interviews:

Interview with actor David Fox, who plays "Samuel":
<http://www.torontostage.com/reviews/medCloseFox.html>

Interview with Director Micheline Chevrier in *Eye Magazine*:
http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2004-01-22/stage_theatrepreview.php

Online Reviews:

Globe and Mail review:

<http://www.globeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/TPStory/LAC/20040124/WATER24/TPEntertainment/Theatre>

NOW review:

http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/current/stage_theatrereviews.php

Preview the Visuals:

Photos of *Written on Water*, including Judith Bowden's costume and set design work:
http://www.canstage.com/2003-2004/media/images/written_images.asp

Additional Resources

NAC Programs for teachers and students:-

-The Skills Shop puts theatre professionals and students together for hands-on, in-school, group workshops.

-Workshops Plus! offers pre-student matinee workshops that allow for a full-day visit to the NAC.

Teachers Play! offers one- and two-day workshops for teachers in areas such as: Lighting, Voice, Movement, Acting Technique, and Design. See the *ArtsAlive* publication, available through the NAC, for more information, or contact Outreach Coordinator Janet Irwin at (613) 236-2502 or jirwin2502@rogers.com.

General Theatre Resources:-

-ArtsAlive, a website developed and maintained by the NAC with resources and information to teachers and students studying theatre

www.artsalive.ca

-Theatre Ontario, a central source for resource information

www.theatreontario.org

-The Council of Drama and Dance in Education, monitors, develops, supports and promotes drama and dance in Ontario schools

www.code.on.ca.

-The Playwrights in Schools program offered by the Playwrights Guild of Canada

(<http://www.playwrightsguild.ca>) makes it possible, for a nominal fee, for playwrights to visit your class to do a reading, a workshop, or a chat about their background. A brochure on the program is available from PGC, 2nd floor - 54 Wolseley Street, Toronto ON, M5A 1A5 (416) 703-0201.

Teacher Resource Page #1 -- Maxims

1. A half-truth is a whole lie.
2. Punctuality is the art of waiting for others.
3. Time is a stranger who settles inside us.
4. Death is the only competition where everyone wants to arrive last.
5. The elderly have to be handled with care like wilted roses that lose their petals at the slightest touch.
6. Laughter is a speck of joy that makes the brain sneeze.
7. Coals burn when they're close together; they die down when they're separated.
8. God provides food, the devil seasons it.

Teacher Resource Page #2 -- Images

1. the news struck, like an ax striking a sick old pine
2. backyards deserted, schools empty
3. a river of rain
4. a bridge sails by like a ship at sea
5. a church lies down in the middle of the river
6. a dress for eternity
7. the sky fell on the earth
8. explosives packed in the alcoves where the saints used to be
9. candles wavering in the wind
10. church bells tolling
11. a woman on a veranda taking no heed
12. her only jewel, a smile
13. the flow of blood broke all the dams
14. new life on the ruins of the old
15. written on water



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