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STUDY GUIDE

The December Man (L'homme de décembre) by Colleen Murphy

National Arts Centre | English Theatre | 2015/16 Season



adapted from the Study Guide prepared for the 2008
Canadian Stage production

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Welcome to the NAC English Theatre production of Colleen Murphy's ***The December Man*** (*L'homme de décembre*), directed by Sarah Garton Stanley. This play's content is appropriate for senior students (grades 10 and up) and is relevant to curriculum expectations in the following courses:

Current Affairs
Canadian History
Women's Studies
English
Sociology
Philosophy
Dramatic Arts

The writing includes coarse language, and the subject of suicide may be disturbing. It is important that teachers prepare their students and we recommend a minimum of two in-class sessions on pre-performance activities and at least one post-performance. We encourage teachers to discuss and explore the themes from this play.

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A PLACE TO BEGIN: *The December Man (L'homme de décembre)*

The events of December 6, 1989 will forever be burned into the collective consciousness of all Canadians. Each year Canadians remember the events of that day and honour the memory of the women who were killed.

Colleen Murphy has noted in the text of *The December Man (L'homme de décembre)*, "This is a work of imagination. My intention is not to feed off the horrifying events that took place December 6, 1989 in the École Polytechnique where fourteen women were murdered, or to exploit the pain of families and friends who have been devastated, but to use the public event as a point of departure. While drawing on some facts from the historical record I have made no attempt to give a factual account of the event. I have altered and embellished reality and extended imaginary characters into real space and time."

Through the use of the imaged dramatic context in *The December Man (L'homme de décembre)*, the personal and lasting effects of December 6, 1989 are examined with scalpel-like precision, reminding the audience that effects of such an event continue to reverberate in society long after the story disappears from the front page.

Please Note: LANGUAGE AND SUICIDE

The play contains some coarse language, both in French and English, and suicide is discussed and depicted.

PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES

1. Vocabulary

Included with this guide is a glossary of vocabulary and terms from the script (p. 9). Have your students review this list – it contains brief descriptions of important geographic and thematic references.

2. The Road Map of My Life

The following activity can occupy one or two seventy-five minute periods prior to seeing the play. The teacher is encouraged to modify each section to meet the needs, interest and experience of the students.

Individually, each student will need a marker and a large sheet of chart paper or newsprint.

The teacher will ask each student to create a timeline/roadmap of their life using words, drawings or diagrams on the piece of chart paper or newsprint. (The teacher may wish to demonstrate the road map by drawing their own map on a chalkboard and listing a couple of events from their own life.)

A line, not necessarily straight, like a road on a map, will be drawn on the paper. The entire sheet should be used for the line so the students can add, in chronological order, the following information:

- Date and location of their birth
- Firsts – e.g. first day of school
- Significant events/achievements, schools attended, school events
- Family events and rituals, holidays, travel

This activity should be given seven to ten minutes to complete. At the end of ten minutes, have the student join with a partner and share the details of their maps with each other. Allow three to five minutes for sharing.

My Special Place

Working with the same partner, instruct the students to individually select a special place from their road map. The special place is a real place from their life journey that they would like to return to.

Working with the same partner, have the students individually describe, with as much sensory detail as possible, the special place to their partner. As well, they should be on their feet and moving as they describe and mime their special place. Allow three to five minutes for this activity.

Moving Into Fours

The partners A and B join another pair, C and D, to make a group of four. Partner A assumes the role of B and describes to C and D all the important information from B's road map and their special place.

B then does the same for A. C and D do the same for each other.

My Journey So Far

Once all four members of the group have completed this activity, instruct them to select one of the road maps as the text for a group presentation entitled "My Journey So Far." The group presentation will be presented to the class.

The group presentation will consist of five to seven tableaux selected from one of their road maps. The group must now rehearse their presentation and work for smooth and economical transitions between tableaux. As well, each tableau must have a title.

Allow five to seven minutes for this activity and then have one or two groups share their work with the class. (Not all groups need to present at this time.)

My Journey So Far – Backwards

Having seen one or two groups share "My Journey So Far," have the students return to their groups and reverse the order of their presentation. In other words, the last tableau becomes the first and the first becomes the last. The titles for each tableau may remain the same, or the groups may change them.

Allow three to five minutes for this activity and then have one or two groups share their work with the class. (Again, not all groups need to present. It would be informative if one of the groups who present the backwards version were one of the same groups who originally presented forwards.)

Questions

After sharing the backwards presentations, the teacher may ask the following questions:

- a. What was different about presenting the journey backwards? What new discoveries did you make about the person's journey when you played the story backwards?
- b. Did you have to make any changes/adjustments to your presentation in order to make it work backwards? If so, what were they and why did you make them?
- c. What is the effect of seeing the end of the story first or knowing the end of the journey at the beginning?
- d. What is the literary term when the audience, watching a play, knows information that the characters in the play don't know? (dramatic irony)

3. Play Synopsis

A public tragedy shatters a working class family in Montréal. Struggling to survive the aftermath, Benoît and Kathleen do everything they can to help their beloved son cope with guilt and rage...but Jean's young life becomes unglued. Using humour and the humdrum of everyday life, the play intuitively moves backwards in time to the fateful day when Jean, the only ray of hope in this working class family, escaped the massacre...or thought he did. This searing drama on courage, heroism and despair explores the long private shadows that public violence casts.

Colleen Murphy has chosen to run the events in the play backwards. The last part of the story chronologically is the first scene of the play and the last scene of the play is the first part of the story. Seeing the story unfold in reverse order creates powerful dramatic irony and pathos as the audience watches the journeys of the characters knowing how the story will end.

Ask each of your students to think of a brief experience they have had in the past month – this could be as simple as writing an exam, attending a movie, sharing a family dinner, going on a date, painting a picture, etc. Have them write no more than two paragraphs describing the circumstances of this experience in reverse order. The main action, moment or event should take place at the end of the story. Encourage students to read their work and discuss the impact of the stories in relation to their chronology.

4. The Impact of Violence

Colleen Murphy's *The December Man* (*L'homme de décembre*) offers a unique opportunity to examine the impact of violence beyond the act itself. The focus of the violence is the December 6th Montreal Massacre but there are of course many levels of violence throughout the play, beginning with the suicide of Jean's parents.

a. Have your students read a local newspaper over several days and ask them to clip out any articles which deal with violent acts. Each student should collect and keep one article that interests them or has an impact. Provide a large piece of paper or several sheets of bristle board and have all the students display their collection of articles – being sure to keep the one that they selected. The idea is to create a "class collage" that will remain in the classroom throughout your examination of the themes in the play.

b. Using their selected articles, have each student write a monologue from the viewpoint of someone mentioned in their article. They could choose to represent a victim of violence, the perpetrator, a police officer at the scene, etc. Encourage them to describe the actions as seen through the eyes of their character. Invite students to read their monologues to the class. If appropriate, give the class some time to rehearse the monologues as scenes and perform them. Discuss the different responses to violence from the various viewpoints.

5. Working with a Scene from the Play

Give students a copy of Scene 6 between Kate (the mother) and Jean (her son) included on page 11 of this guide. Working with a partner, have students decide who will play each role. After reading the scene together, the students may explore the text using any or all of the three strategies listed below. At the discretion of the teacher, pairs using these strategies may share their finished work with the entire class or in smaller groups.

a. Objectives

What do Jean and Kate want in this scene? What is the objective for each character? Why do they want it now? What will happen to each of them if they don't achieve their objective now?

b. The Echo

During this exploration of the scene, the students will sit face to face and keep as much eye contact as possible. The exercise starts as the student playing Kate says their first line.

Kate: You did what you could Jean.

The partner who is playing Jean repeats the same line back to the partner playing Kate, using the same vocal energy and emphasis. The partner playing Jean then says his line.

Jean: I didn't do anything – nothing.

The partner playing Kate repeats the same line back, using the same vocal energy and emphasis.

The entire scene is to be read this way back and forth until it is finished. When all the pairs have finished, the teacher asks students what discoveries they made about the characters, their relationship in the scene and the stylistic qualities of the script.

c. One-Word Sentences

In this exercise, the students say aloud the most important word from each sentence their character speaks. They do not say the entire sentence, only the most important word that encapsulates the essence of the entire sentence. They must also say the word with the emphasis and knowledge of the entire sentence. The exercise might sound like this depending on which single word each student selects.

Kate: Could.

Jean: Nothing.

Kate: Phoned.

Jean: Ran!

The entire scene is played using this technique. When all the pairs have finished, the teacher asks students what discoveries they made about the characters, their relationship in the scene and the stylistic qualities of the script.

Moving Towards the Play

Towards the end of the class prior to attending the performance, give each student a copy of the following review/response assignment and review it with them. The selection of a submission date is recommended at this time.

Play Review/Response

Answer the following question in point form. Be sure to make a specific point and provide a specific example from the production to prove your point.

1. Describe and explain two strengths of the script.
2. Describe and explain two weaknesses of the script.
3. Describe and explain two strengths of the acting.
4. Describe and explain two weaknesses of the acting.
5. Make three observations and provide three specific examples from the production about any three technical aspects of the production such as lighting, sound, set design or costume design.
6. Identify, using three specific examples from the play, any themes or issues that are explored in the play and that concern you.
7. Select one of these themes or issues and explain why it concerns you.

VOCABULARY AND TERMINOLOGY

École Polytechnique – A school of engineering located at the University of Montreal

Caisse Populaire – Credit union / bank

11th Commandment – In reference to the Ten Commandments as found in the Old Testament of the Bible

Expo – A world's fair/exposition held in Montreal in 1967

La Ronde – An amusement park that was part of Expo 67

Rosary – A set of prayer beads and a system of prayers to be said while holding the beads

Crucifix – A cross with a representation of Christ's body. The crucifix is the principle symbol of Christianity and represents Christ's sacrifice/death by crucifixion.

Mortal Sin – According to the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church, a mortal sin is a sin that unless confessed and absolved, condemns a person's soul to Hell after death.

Cardinal Leger – Canadian prelate (Cardinal) of the Roman Catholic Church and former Archbishop of Montreal. Died November 13, 1991.

Chomedey – A city north-west of Montreal

Gaspé – A town and geographic area in Eastern Quebec where Jacques Cartier took possession of New France in 1534

Morbid – One who is abnormally susceptible to gloomy or unwholesome feelings

Sensei – Japanese title used to refer to or address a teacher or authority figure

Biodome – Originally known as the Velodome, built for cycling competitions at the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal. The facility is now an attraction that allows visitors to walk through replicas of four different ecosystems found in the Americas.

Laurentians – A mountain range in southern Quebec, north of St. Lawrence River and the Ottawa River

Shear – An action or stress resulting from applied forces which causes two contiguous parts of a body to slide relative to each other in a direction parallel to their plane of contact

Lachine – A borough within the City of Montreal

Reinforced concrete – Poured concrete with steel bars inside the concrete

Westmount – A wealthy neighbourhood in Montreal

Provigo – A chain of grocery stores in Quebec

Polio – A viral disease which attacks muscles, nerves and limbs resulting in paralysis

Côte Ste-Catherine, Plamondon, Namur, de la Savane, du Collège, Ste-Croix, rue Hodge, rue Petit – Street names around the University of Montreal

Salmonella – A bacteria which causes intestinal infections resulting in diarrhea, fever, vomiting and abdominal cramps

Mass – The celebration of the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic Church. A ritual which is performed in the memory of Christ in which the drinking of wine and the eating of bread represent the blood and body of Christ

Sun Life Building – Completed in 1931, the office building is located in the heart of Montreal's financial district and was home originally to the Sun Life Insurance Company

Kansas City Hyatt – A hotel built with significant architectural design flaws which caused load-bearing member failure and the collapse of walkways in the hotel's lobby on July 17, 1981. 114 guests were killed and over 200 injured.

Palm Sunday – The Sunday before Easter when Christ entered Jerusalem and was honoured by citizens who placed palm leaves on the ground as a sign of respect when Christ passed by

Gamil Gharbi – Marc Lepine's name at birth (Gamil Rodrigue Gharbi). Lepine was the son of an Algerian father, Rachid Liass Gharbi, and a Canadian mother, Monique Lepine.

Scene Six (excerpt)

KATE: You did what you could, Jean.

JEAN: I didn't do anything - nothing.

KATE: You phoned 9-1-1.

JEAN: Yeah, *after* I ran out of the classroom and *before* I ran out of the building.

KATE: Everyone else ran!

JEAN: That doesn't make it okay!

KATE: It's not okay but what else you gonna to do when a crazy's running around with a gun shooting people. This guy I heard on TV he said ordinary people aren't expected to be heroes in those situations. He said okay - people panic, they freeze or they run - if you froze you'd prob'ly been killed.

JEAN: That's not the point, Ma – the point is no one tried to stop him.

KATE: The point is you're still alive.

JEAN: It's not enough to still be alive!

KATE: Yes, it is – you can build buildings and hospitals and churches -

JEAN: What about those women? What are they gonna build?

Silence

JEAN: Ma.

KATE: What?

JEAN: Maybe I'm dead, too.

KATE: Eh?

JEAN: Maybe I didn't get to the ambulance in time.

KATE: Don't talk crazy.

JEAN: He killed me, Ma.

KATE: Your father quit smoking New Year's and it's still hard for him. He sweats, gets up at night crying, he suffers at work 'cause the guys they tease him but he takes it one day at a time - that's what you have to do.

JEAN: Please could I take Karate lessons?

KATE: We don't have the money for stuff like that – don't keep asking me.

JEAN: I'll save up my allowance plus use some money from work.

KATE: That money you earn at *Provigo* is for next year's tuition.

JEAN: But I have to be prepared for when it happens again.

KATE: It'll never happen again.

JEAN: I want it to happen again - and next time Marc fuckin' Lépine comes bursting into class I'll have muscles and reflexes...and guts. I left those women once but next time I'll stand and fight.

POST-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES

Discussion and Debriefing

During the class that follows the students seeing the play, the teacher may wish to have students sit in a circle and deconstruct the experience of attending a live performance, the production and the play.

A discussion of this nature generally starts well by asking the students what they liked and disliked about the production and the play. A review of the questions found in the Play Review/Response will also focus the discussion and help the students as they formulate answers to the questions.

The discussion can then move a little deeper as the teacher may wish to ask any of the following questions:

1. What was the effect of seeing the story in reverse? Was the use of dramatic irony effective? Why or why not?
2. Given the importance of dramatic irony to the play, what was the most moving scene of the play? Why?
3. Do you as an audience member have to be emotionally moved for a play to be effective? Why or why not?
4. In Scene 7, Benoit says to Jean, "... you can blame yourself forever or else you understand it's not your fault and let the thing go." Why was Jean unable to "let the thing go?" How could Benoit have handled Jean's response to the terrible event differently?
5. Late in the play, Kate says to Benoit, "Know who I blame – I blame that guy and that guy's mother." Why is this line ironic?
6. Did Kate and Benoit's fail to clearly understand Jean rather than dismiss his behaviour? Are Kate and Benoit responsible for Jean's death? Did they fail as parents? Explain.
7. In Scene 7, Jean says to his father, "The structure has to withstand all the loads that will be placed upon it or it will fail – fall apart." Explain the significance of this line and explain the symbolic importance of the scale model high-rise that appears in each scene of the play. Describe the changes to the model in each scene.

The Pivotal Moment Improv

The plot of *The December Man* (*L'homme de décembre*) leads the audience to believe that the journeys for the characters were inevitable. For whatever reasons, Kate and Benoit failed to understand how profoundly Jean was upset. Kate and Benoit's failure ultimately condemns them to console their grief and inaction by ending their own lives. What if there was a pivotal moment that would have changed the inevitable outcome of the play?

Working in groups of three, with the knowledge of what happened to the characters in the play, create an improvised scene that could change the outcome of the play. The improvised scene can start with these lines from the play:

JEAN: I don't feel like going fishing today.

BENOIT: Why not? In this weather trout are gonna be jumping right out of the water.

KATE: Jean's tired.

JEAN: P'pa...?

BENOIT: Eh?

Jean seems to want to say something to his father and for a moment they look at each other expectation.

The improvised scene begins here.

Kate or Jean's Journal – Creative Writing

The teacher may wish to assign the following creative writing assignment.

Kate's sister, Madeline, discovers a journal written by either Kate or Jean as she clears out the Fournier's house weeks later. Writing in role as Madeline, answer the following questions:

1. Describe where you found the journal. Where was it in the house? What does it look like and what does the handwriting look like? Did you read it right away or did you wait? Did you consider not reading it?
2. Does the journal explain why things happened the way they did? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Having read the journal, explain what you have learned about either Kate or Jean.
4. What will you do with the journal now that you have read it? Explain.
5. What lessons or knowledge will you take away with you now that you have read the journal?

FURTHER RESOURCES

“Our Daughters, Ourselves” – Essay by Stevie Cameron

“The Seven-Minute Life of Marc Lepine” – Essay by Nathalie Petrowski

“A Day to Mourn all Victims of Crime” – Essay by Donna Laframboise

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- The Montreal Massacre
- Feminism
- Sexism
- Violence against women / Gender-based violence
- Social inequality
- Crimes of passion
- Patriarchal power
- Gun legislation
- The White Ribbon Campaign

Should you have any questions or comments about this guide, please contact

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