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Plot Summary
An ordinary man, an accountant named George Spelvin, finds himself onstage suddenly. He has no idea how he got there and assumes he's having a nightmare. Playwright Christopher Durang proceeds to take us on a hilarious romp through the cliché dream that every actor has experienced, that of being onstage without rehearsal and ignorant of the lines of the play. Along the way we meet characters from Samuel Beckett, William Shakespeare, and Noel Coward, all played by famous actors from the past, such as Sarah Siddons and Ellen Terry. While poor George struggles to make sense of his predicament, the play within the play at last switches to Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. As George realizes that he is playing Sir Thomas Moore, the executioner from *A Man for All Seasons* appears and all the characters work to get George to mouth his final lines. When he does, the executioner raises his ax and the lights go out. The lights come back on moments later, and all the actors take elaborate bows—all the actors, that is, except George Spelvin, who appears to be dead.

The Play as Literature: Style
Encourage students to analyze the various styles showcased in *The Actor's Nightmare*. Point out that Durang uses our own knowledge of and emotions about nightmares to pull us along through the play. In a sense, George Spelvin is all of us as we would be if we were thrown into an unfamiliar landscape with only a sketchy knowledge of that world. George comes to the stage armed only with a handful of quotes from various plays and secure in the knowledge that he is an accountant and not an actor. To pull off this comic style, Durang himself must have a complete knowledge of the stage and of all the styles he parodies within the piece. Encourage students to take special note of the places in the play where the various styles overlap. You might also want to discuss with students their thoughts about who might be the best audience for this play.

The Play as Theatre: Costumes
For most of *The Actor's Nightmare*, George Spelvin is costumed as a traditional Hamlet. Discuss this costume with students. To help them better understand Elizabethan costuming, tell them that in Shakespeare's day all roles were played by men. The men who played males wore doublets—short jackets that opened in front and featured a stand-up neckband. Under the doublet the men wore short pants that puffed out and reached just above the knee. They also wore long stockings and unheeled, thick-soled shoes. The men who played women wore huge hoop skirts that made the hips look considerably wider than normal. The skirts themselves were heavily draped. The bodices were very tight to produce the effect of a long, slender waist—an effect that was heightened by the underpinning of corsets featuring stays made of bone or wood. You may wish to show students pictures of traditional Elizabethan costuming, and then have them draw either a male or a female costume from Shakespeare's time.

Warm Up!
Encourage students to use humor in their exploration of various styles. Remind them that often humor can be created by juxtaposing unlike things. For example, a student might apply the style of William Shakespeare to the character of an urban con artist. Tell students to look for places in the play where Durang uses this type of humorous juxtaposition.
Responding to the Play
1. Some students will note the illogic and the stress that make this play very much like a nightmare. Others will point out that for a nightmare it is mild, since the actor seems to muddle his way through it pretty well.
2. George is the only actor who must play a contemporary actor trying to play other roles. He must maintain a contemporary style while making stabs at other styles as well.
3. Students might recognize Coward’s social sophistication, light subject matter, and witty repartee.
4. Students might recognize Shakespeare’s archaic language, his use of metaphor and other imagery, and blank verse.
5. Sketches should reflect the period with which each character is allied.

For Further Discussion
1. *The Actor’s Nightmare* is a send-up of a common nightmare actors have. But, on another level, the play is about feelings to which every person can relate. Explain. *(Students should recognize that performance anxiety and fear of the unknown are common human emotions. As a class, you might make a list of some of the various human situations to which the play corresponds.)*
2. Describe three of the styles in *The Actor’s Nightmare* using only three words. *(Students’ responses will vary. Accept any reasonable response. Samples: Shakespeare: classical, poetic, philosophical; Coward: frothy, wry, tongue-in-cheek; Beckett: dark, brooding, experimental.)*

Creating and Performing
1. Students should choose a vehicle with which they are very familiar. Encourage them to look at their sources in terms of style as well as content and to convey a bit of each in their parodies.
2. Students can either draw their designs or create them out of existing clothing and fabrics. Encourage those who draw their models to sketch out not only the basic costume but also the various costume pieces that will be added.
3. Encourage students to use humor in their sketches. Remind them that they need not work from a single genre. For example, they might place a cartoon character such as Bugs Bunny in a scene with Ebenezer Scrooge from the Charles Dickens short story “A Christmas Carol.”
For Performance

- Depending on the costume budget, some productions use very basic clothing and then add specific costume pieces to give the flavor of a more complex costume. Encourage students to think about how they might costume *The Actor's Nightmare* if they had a very limited costume budget.

- On pages 11 and 12, George has a monologue in which he presumably recites every speech, rhyme, motto, or lesson he knows by heart. Encourage students to write a monologue for themselves that patches together the various materials they have had to recite aloud from memory. Have volunteers perform their monologues aloud. Encourage them to use a variety of styles depending on the content of the quoted material.

- Tell students that occasionally actors either forget their own lines or find themselves onstage with another actor who has dropped lines. Sometimes to get back on track, actors make up pieces of dialogue to fill gaps or to provide a hint to the other actor as to where he or she should be in the script. This process is called *ad-libbing*. Encourage students to note every point in the play where another actor is forced to ad-lib because of George.

For Reading

- Tell students that in the past George Spelvin was a name used in programs when an actor was double-cast or when the play called for a certain character to remain anonymous until a crucial scene. For example, if one actor were playing twins, some programs might list the two characters this way:
  
  Joe Schwarz .......... Max Adamski  
  Aaron Schwarz......... George Spelvin

  Discuss the significance of Durang's using the name George Spelvin for the main character in *The Actor's Nightmare*.

- Durang chose styles and specific plays that would be fairly familiar to a theatre-going audience. Encourage students to think of other authors’ styles or specific plays that might be fun to parody (for example, Tennessee Williams, *Death of a Salesman*, *Oklahoma*, etc.). Volunteers might enjoy improvising a monologue or short scene parodying a specific play or playwright.

- Tell students that there comes a point in a rehearsal process when actors must get “off book,” meaning they must make the transition to being able to act without looking at their scripts. This transition often takes a few days (and, in the nonprofessional theatre, sometimes weeks). While actors are getting off book they deliver their lines from memory, but call “Line!” when they need the stage manager or assistant director to tell them their next line. Have students note the places in the play where George calls for a line.

Asides

Further Reading

Christopher Durang has been producing works for the stage since the early 1970s. Collections of his work can be found in the following two volumes, among many others.


- *27 Short Plays by Christopher Durang* (Contemporary Playwrights Series) (Smith & Kraus, 1996)

Internet

Those students who are interested in finding out more about the life and work of writer Christopher Durang can visit the Christopher Durang fan page at the following address.

www.christopherdurang.com/Biography-Long.htm

More About Christopher Durang

Although some of his work reads as straight parody, a number of Christopher Durang’s plays combine a strong point of view with serious social criticism. His one-act play *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You* offers extremely pointed criticism of the Catholic Church; *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* takes a hard look at incompatible marriages that allow the husband and wife to victimize not only each other, but, perhaps more importantly, their children as well.
Assessment

The Actor’s Nightmare

Reading
Christopher Durang parodies several distinguished playwrights in The Actor’s Nightmare. Choose from among this short list to identify the styles represented. Write the letter of the correct author on the blank line.

a. Samuel Beckett wrote dark, nonrealistic plays that reflected the humor and pathos of the human condition.
b. William Shakespeare, considered by many to be the world’s greatest playwright, wrote comedies and tragedies in verse.
c. Noel Coward wrote sly, witty plays full of banter mostly dealing with wealthy people.

_________ 1. I always feared the Taj Mahal would look like a biscuit box. Did it?
_________ 2. Thou turn’st mine eyes into my very soul/ And there I see such black and grainéd spots/ As will not leave their tinct.
_________ 3. Two nights together had these gentlemen/ Marcellus and Bernardo, on their watch/ In the dead waste and middle of the night/ Been thus encountered.
_________ 5. The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth like the gentle rain from heaven upon the place below . . .
_________ 6. Oh, Elyot, darling, I’m sorry. We were mad to have left each other. Kiss me.
_________ 7. Oh speak no more! These words like daggers enter in mine ears.
_________ 8. We’ll just wait. Pause. Either he’ll come, pause pause pause, or he won’t.
_________ 9. Oh my God, I’ve gone blind. I can’t see, Willie. Oh my God. Oh what a terrible day. Oh dear. Oh my. Oh well. Not so bad really. I only used my eyes occasionally. When I wanted to see something. But no more!
_________ 10. Extraordinary how potent cheap music is.

Writing
Practice writing in three different styles. Write the opening line or speech of a play, first in the style of William Shakespeare, then in the style of Noel Coward, and finally in the style of Samuel Beckett.

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

Performing
Choose one of the following activities to perform.

• Improvise a monologue in one of the styles presented in The Actor’s Nightmare.
• Create a new ending for the play—one in which George takes over his nightmare and ultimately escapes from it.
• Work with a partner to create a scene in which each of you plays a character in a different style. Keep the dialogue going back and forth but attempt to maintain the integrity of the two styles represented.