

The **English Theatre**
Frankfurt

presents



**Teacher`s Support Pack
(Comprehensive Version)**

2015

Arbeitsmaterialien für den Englisch - Unterricht
(Sek. II)

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	p. 01
2. Drama Activities	p. 01
3. Visual Arts Activities	p. 06
4. English Language-focused Activities	p. 06
5. Activities related to American History, World Studies, and Social Studies	p. 07
6. Further Resources	p. 10

A note for usage of this material:

Sie können dieses **Teacher`s Support Pack** auf Anfrage auch als Word-Dokument bekommen, um einzelne Texte/Aufgaben vor Ausdruck zu bearbeiten. Das bietet Ihnen die Möglichkeit, das Paket in der von Ihnen gewünschten Fassung an Ihre SchülerInnen digital weiterzuleiten. Das Bild- und Informationsmaterial kann den SchülerInnen dabei helfen, **sich einen Überblick über die relevanten thematischen Aspekte zu verschaffen und eigene Sichtweisen des Stücks zu entdecken.**

Bei allen Fragen bezüglich dieser Materialien oder Interesse an

- **Begleitworkshops zu einem Aufführungsbesuch** für Ihre Lerngruppe
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Das Team von T.I.E.S (Theatre in Education Service) wünscht Ihnen viel Erfolg bei der Arbeit mit dem Teacher`s Support Pack. Wir freuen uns auf einen Aufführungsbesuch mit Ihrer Lerngruppe.

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What we can grasp, we can leave behind.

Ancient Greek saying

1. Introduction

This Teacher's Support Pack offers additional material as a supplement to The English Theatre Frankfurt's programme brochure on *Other Desert Cities*. Its emphasis is on classroom activities.

Here is a list of some of the major themes dealt with in the play: Family dynamics and secrets. Deception and discovery. Loss and grief. Love and mercy. American politics and war.

2. Drama Activities

The characters

Suggested activity:

Make short sketches of the characters in *Other Desert Cities*.

Samples:

Polly Wyeth, née Grauman, has a Jewish family background. She is in her early sixties. She is a former TV-soap opera script writer, who collaborated with her sister Silda. Unlike her sister she supports the Republican party. She smokes occasionally but tries to hide it from her husband, which her husband does vice versa.

Lyman Wyeth is a few years older than his wife, Polly. He is an ex-actor turned Republican politician. Among other conservative stances, he is pro arms. He and his wife have good friends among the old-Hollywood upper middle class (e.g., Ronald and Nancy Reagan). Whenever he can, he tries to be diplomatic. In addition to normal cigarettes he also smokes pot occasionally.

Silda Grauman might be a few years younger than her sister, but she looks older than her. Unlike her, she never married. She stopped collaborating with her sister in the field of script writing because of different ideological attitudes, which are more liberal. Despite many years of therapy, she still suffers of alcoholism and takes medication to cater for her psychological problems. She is also a heavy smoker. Financially broke, she is dependent on her sister.

Brooke Wyeth probably is in her early forties when she is introduced. She is a successful writer with an Ivy league education. She has suffered from a heavy depression after she learned about her brother's terrorist actions and death. She needed therapy for many years and had to rely on her parents' support. She has a

liberal, Democratic stance. Her husband, Cary, recently broke up with her after an unsuccessful marriage therapy. Occasionally, she smokes pot.

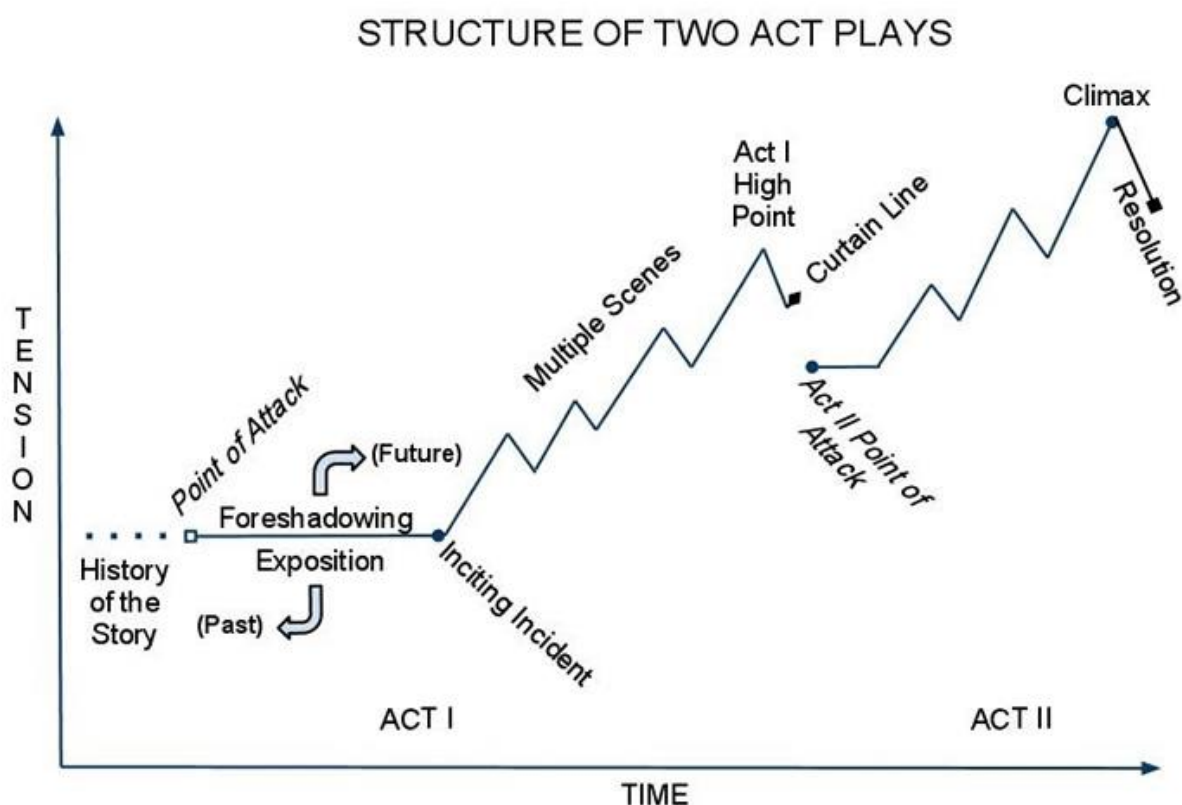
Trip Wyeth is in his thirties when he is introduced. He is a successful TV-show producer with an Ivy league education. He loves junk food and porn. He has sympathy for left-wing politics. He smokes pot regularly.

Additional activity:

1. For each character students remember or find three lines in the script which are highly typical for them
2. They try out what gesture might work with each of the lines and then decide which combination works best
3. Students in pairs each impersonate one of the characters using fixed gestures plus lines and improvise a mini-dialogue
4. Add more lines

Discussing elements of the plot

Other Desert Cities is a well-made play which captivates the audience's attention and holds it for a certain limited time by building effective dramatic tension. How it does this can be discussed looking at some of the typical features of what has become a standard two-act play in the Western tradition. Among these are the Point of Attack, History of the Story, Inciting Incident, Exposition, Foreshadowing, Rising Conflict, Act I High Point, Curtain Line, Act II Point of Attack, Climax, and Resolution as illustrated below (taken from Toscan 1995-2012). To this one might add the dramatic premise.



Applying some of these aspects in your classroom discussion will give focus and foster a better understanding of the play.

The Point of Attack

The Point of Attack is “that first thing the audience will see or hear as the play begins. [...] Unlike novelists, successful playwrights know never to start a play at the beginning of the story. [...] keep in mind that every story and its characters has a history.” (Toscan 1995-2012).

Ask: How can the Point of Attack be described in *Other Desert Cities*? Why did the playwright possibly chose this point and not another?

Sample answer:

The first act starts shortly before eight o'clock in the morning of 23 December 2004 in the Wyeth family house, Palm Springs, California. The Wyeths are playing cards in the living room while they are in the middle of an argument. The mother has been telling her daughter how much she feels uncomfortable with her living on the East Coast. In defence, the daughter argues in favour of her place and comments on what she takes as invasive criticism of her person. In trying to be more diplomatic, the father then rephrases the mother's argument and emphasizes that he and the mother would merely love their daughter to live closer to home. Then the brother interferes, taking his sister's side. He points out that California just does not really suit his sister. – The opening sequence thus shows the Wyeth family dynamics in a nutshell. From the very beginning the audience understands there is a lot of tension between the members but also strong affection that binds them together. The family's condition therefore is still rather stable, although quite ambivalent. In any case, it draws the audience's attention and poses the question how these people will get along with each other when there is a stronger conflict.

Further questions to ask: What other options might the playwright have had? Would you start telling the story at the same plot point?

The Inciting Incident

The Inciting Incident is the event or decision that begins a story's real problem.

Everything up and until that moment is Backstory; everything after is 'the story.' Before this moment there is an equilibrium, a relative peace that the characters in a story have grown accustomed to. This incisive moment, or *plot point* occurs and upsets the balance of things. Suddenly there is a problem to be solved. (J. R. Hull, Narrative First)

Ask: What is the Inciting Incident in *Other Desert Cities*?

Sample answer:

The Inciting Incident is depicted when Brooke hands out manuscript copies of her memoir to the other family members (p. 24) telling them it was “the story of everything that happened to us.” By this she mainly refers to an explication of the traumatic episode that led her older brother Henry to planting a bomb in an army

recruiting station, before he appears to have killed himself as well as what this entailed. Her parents are shocked that she is determined to publish her version of the story very soon. They fear they will have to live with a bad reputation for the rest of their lives and lose all of their friends. The dramatic question now is this: Will the parents read the memoir, approve of the story, and then give their consent to publish it after all? Or will the dispute over the book end all good family relationship? Moreover, Brooke knows her memoir is a reconstruction of past events and cannot be sure if she really got it right. Therefore another question to be resolved is this: Will the parents finally be willing to talk about what happened the day her brother disappeared? -- There are two passages which can be seen as foreshadowing the Inciting Incident: (a) the first instance in which the manuscript is rather marginally mentioned (p. 6), (b) when Brooke talks to her brother about the book (p. 15), which already suggests the problem the parents might have when confronted with the project.

Exposition and the History of the Story

Exposition is the first stage of a fictional or dramatic plot presentation, in which necessary background information is provided. Knowing the Inciting Incident, one can clearly determine passages of Exposition and start reconstructing the History of the Story. Sometimes it takes some collocation work to figure out details of the Backstory.

Ask: What is the Backstory of the story indicated by the play's Exposition? Make a list.

Sample answers:

- On page 5 Trip argues: "Look; we talk politics, it's only eight in the morning [...]". Right after her first line Brooke says: "[...] my God, I've been here less than three hours [...]". Assuming the characters are reliable here, Brooke must have arrived at her family's house between five and six o'clock in the morning.
- The first detailed information about what Brook's brother Henry did is shared as late as page 15, when Brooke confides to her brother Trip what her book is about: "[...] it is about Henry. Whom we can't talk about, it's about our brother, who went to war with our parents, joined a cult, disappeared, and then planted a bomb in an army recruiting station, before killing himself [...]". Notice, however, that the information given by a character is of course determined by a character's perspective which may not represent the complete or true picture. In fact, as it turns out, Brooke's perspective is flawed in at least one respect. Then again, such flaws are crucial for the drama to develop.

The Climax

The Climax is the turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story which decides the fate of the protagonist. It represents the point of greatest tension in the work.

Ask: When is the Climax of the story?

Sample answer:

The story reaches its Climax very close to the end of the play (p. 50) when the father reveals how he and the mother faked their son's suicide, helping him to escape. Never would they see him or hear of him again, except for occasional phone calls

with only a clicking sound to be heard on the other end of the line. Brooke also learns how her parents agreed to let their daughter in on the secret one day, but how they had failed to do so.

The Premise

The dramatic Premise summarizes the main idea of the play's action in one statement (see Lajos Egri). It is often a generalisation of the main passion that drives the action until it either obtains the object of desire or fails to do so with certain consequences. Of course this only applies to a piece which either has or suggests an end ("closed form"). Note, the concept of the premise also appears in the discourse of the characters Brooke and Polly, who are both fiction writers. Trying to understand Trip's show, Brooke says, "I don't even understand the *premise*. It's like a court room thing with a --?" (p. 7). Commenting on Brook's memoir, Polly argues, "You've written an entire book on the premise that we drove our son to suicide, but only after years of incubating him as a murderer." (p. 43)

Ask: What is the dramatic Premise of the story? What crucial passion drives the main action in the play and how does it come to an end?

Sample answer:

In order to come up with the dramatic Premise we get a good hint from the title of Brooke's manuscript, which was also the working title Jon Robin Baitz had given his play. It is "Love and Mercy". Taking this as a basis, the dramatic Premise of *Other Desert Cities* could read as follows: Strong love for family partly disappointed leads to wanting to know the truth about a family secret, while the threat of going public – albeit with a false story about the secret – leads to the revelation of the truth by confession, which in turn provides understanding and mercy for those who kept the secret.

The Type of Plot Presentation

Different plot types have been distinguished in the Structuralist tradition. One coincides with what has been called the whodunit story and variations of it, without which the genre of detective fiction would not exist. It has also been called "analytical drama" because the action presented on stage or conveyed by narration largely consists of the unravelling of the "prescenic action" which led to a climax in its own terms before the Inciting Incident.

Ask: *Other Desert Cities* is a kind of drama in which the plot is not presented in chronological sequence, but begins at the point when events which took place before the drama started, have reached their climax? How would you call such a plot presentation? – Can you think of other plays that have a similar structure in how the story is told?

Sample answer:

A prime example of analytical drama is Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Other examples are A. Miller's *All My Sons* (1948), E. O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1956), and T. Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer* 1958. *Other Desert Cities* belongs to this tradition, which is clearly indicated by the persistence of the protagonist Brooke to find out what happened the day her brother disappeared or rather what role her parents played in the event (whodunit, how and why). Once she has found out for sure, believing her parents' confessions, her original desire is satisfied. She does not

want to publish her memoir anymore during her parents' life time. In the end there are indications, that her original desire has been replaced by a new one: the search for her older brother. But that is another story or episode.

Follow-up questions:

- In the end, does Brooke publish the true version of her brother's story?
- If Brooke does not publish the historic truth in her memoir, on what grounds can she justify it?
- Do you think Brooke puts all the blame on her parents for what her brother did when he was part of the bombing?
- How would you explain the phenomenon of some people becoming so radical they are willing to commit terrorist acts?
- How would you feel if a family member had done a crime such as the one Henry has committed?

Further Drama activities

- Post-show: in small groups, create a series of tableaux to tell the story of *Other Desert Cities*
- Script an imaginary scene between the late brother Henry and any character
- Find similarities between *Other Desert Cities* and other classic dramas that examine family relationships. Read and compare Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and/or one of Arthur Miller's masterpieces such as *Death of a Salesman* to *Other Desert Cities*
- Write a review of the performance you attended. Include a synopsis, themes, and critique of the theatrical elements in the production (direction, acting, lighting, set, costume, music). Consider commenting on why this show could be pertinent in our world right now. Compare and contrast your review to other theatre reviews of *Other Desert Cities*.
(source: grandtheatre.com)

3. Visual Arts Activities

- Design a new poster for the production *Other Desert Cities*
- Create a small-scale model of the set as if you were the set designer. What pieces would you choose to include?
- Research Italian Designer Emilio Pucci
- Sketch or collage costume renderings for the Wyeth family
- Create a movie poster for one of the movies written by Polly or starring Lyman
(source: grandtheatre.com)

4. English Language-focused Activities

- Create a novel outline for a shocking memoir
- Reflect upon the secrets that each character in *Other Desert Cities* is hiding. By the end of the play, how have they been changed?

- Elaborate on the following quotes in relation to the characters and story: “Families get terrorized by their weakest member” – Polly. “It never ceases to surprize me how cold it gets out here in the desert at night” – Lyman
- Research Ronald Reagan and draw up a character comparison with that of Lyman Wyeth
(source: grandtheatre.com)

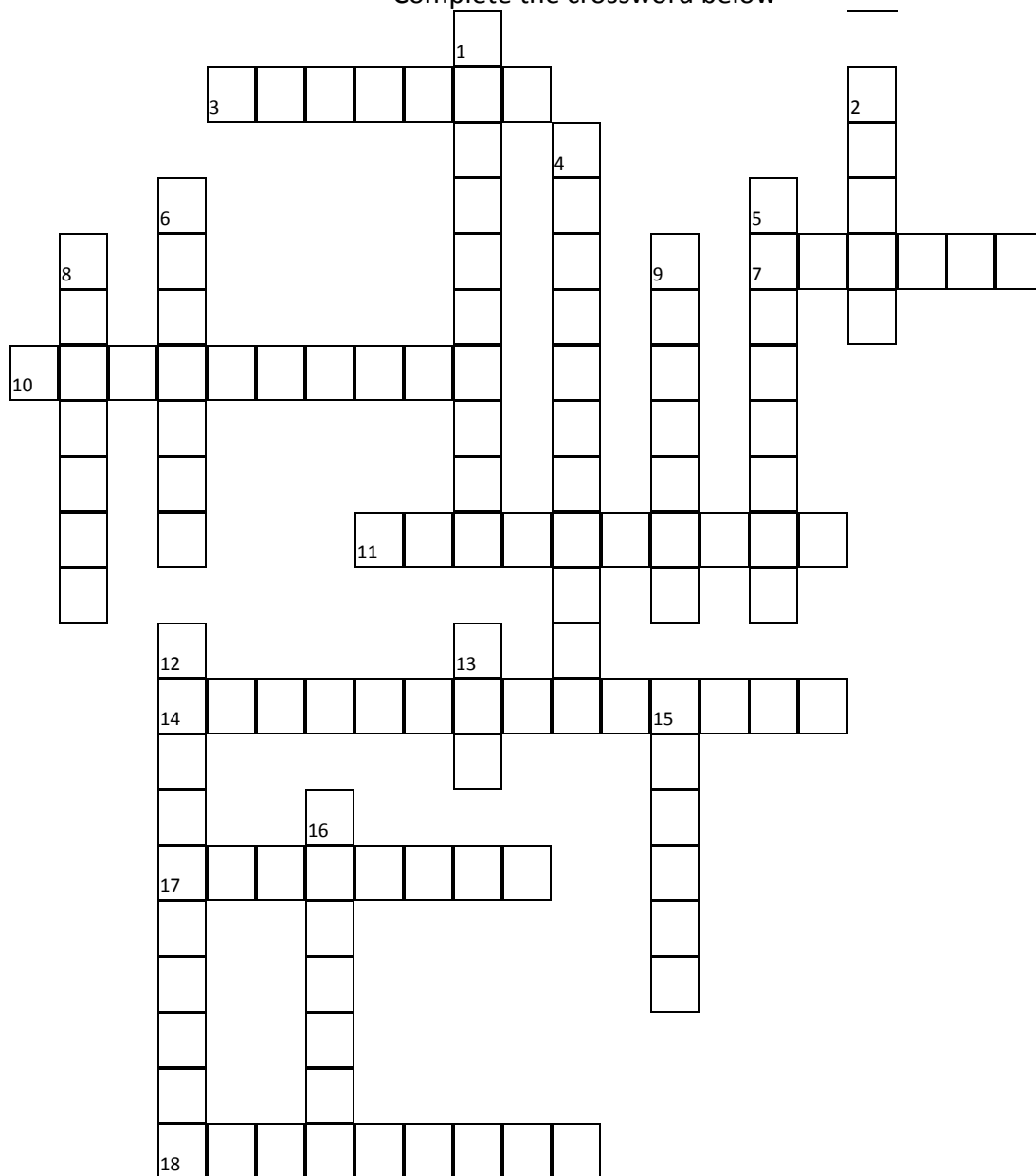
➔ See also the crossword puzzle in the back.

5. Activities related to American History, World Studies, and Social Studies

- Journal about *Other Desert Cities* as a comment on contemporary American Politics
- What is the Grand Old Party? What characteristics of being Republican do Polly and Lyman want to uphold and protect in *Other Desert Cities*?
- Research the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the War on Iraq. What drove America into these wars? What were the attitudes of Americans regarding these wars?
- Henry Wyeth was a part of a radical subculture protesting the War in Vietnam Research and write about some famous American protests, displays, and events in the last 50 years
- Create a media report about Henry Wyeth's suicide and the events that surrounded it
- Are we politically complicit by the choices we make in our personal lives? What does it mean to love someone when loving means that you might hurt them?
- Write responses to these questions supporting them with characters' choices and examples from *Other Desert Cities*
(source: grandtheatre.com)

Other Desert Cities

Complete the crossword below



Across

- 3. Having an obstinate belief in the superiority of one's own opinions and a prejudiced intolerance of opinions of others
- 7. A personal recollection of the past
- 10. A type of document
- 11. Admittance of information
- 14. Excessive care
- 17. A transitory written or printed matter not intended for preservation
- 18. Misleading

Down

- 1. Public esteem
- 2. Moment of highest tension in a play
- 4. The state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas
- 5. Strong desire for success
- 6. Very weak or light
- 8. People who are fanatical and uncompromising in their pursuit of their religious, political, or other ideas
- 9. Part of a syllogism
- 12. To show feelings of superiority; be patronizing
- 13. An abbr. for one of the major political parties in the USA
- 15. A problematic experience
- 16. A city in the Northwest of the USA

6. Further Resources

Baitz, Jon Robin. *Other Desert Cities*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2012.

Egri, Lajos. *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946.

Hull, James R. *Narrative First*. <http://narrativefirst.com/articles/plot-points-and-the-inciting-incident>

Toscan, Richard. *The Playwriting Seminars: The Full-Length Play*. 1995-2012.
<http://www.vcu.edu/arts/playwriting/>

<http://www.oldvictheatre.com/whats-on/2014/other-desert-cities/>

<http://www.grandtheatre.com/files/9513/9386/2248/Other%20Desert%20Cities%20-%20Study%20Guide.pdf>

<https://www.pcs.org/assets/uploads/resource-guides/ODC-Resource-Guide.pdf>

[http://capitalrep.org/sites/default/files/studyguides/Other%20Desert%20Study%20Guide.p
df](http://capitalrep.org/sites/default/files/studyguides/Other%20Desert%20Study%20Guide.pdf)

http://www.pioneertheatre.org/files/6913/8272/0952/ODC_Study_Guide.pdf

<http://oldvictheatre-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/assets/File/2650.pdf>

<http://www.speakeasystage.com/other-desert-cities-2/>

<http://blog.triadstage.org/other-desert-cities/>