

**David Lindsay – Abaire**

# **GOOD PEOPLE**



**The English Theatre Frankfurt 2013**

**Teacher`s Support Pack – Comprehensive Version**

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Diese Version ist für die ausführliche Behandlung des Stücks im Unterricht der Gymnasialen Oberstufe gedacht.

Sie decken mit den Texten wesentliche Unterrichtsinhalte ab von

Q 1: Them and Us (the One- Track mind, Prejudice, Intolerance)

Q 2: Extreme Situations (Love and Happiness, Fight for Survival, Tragic Dilemma)

Q 3: The Dynamics of Change (Promised Lands: Dreams and Realities, Ideals and Reality)

**Alle Assignments (Aufgabenformen) in diesen Materialien eignen sich zum Training für monologische und dialogische Fertigkeiten für die Kommunikationsprüfung.**

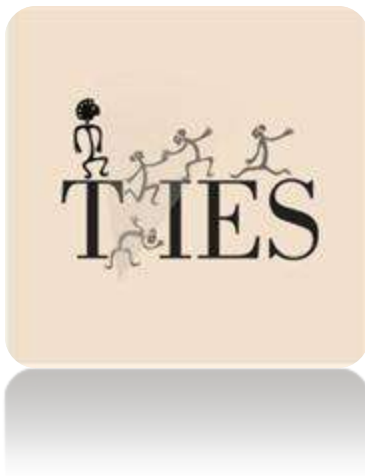
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**We are grateful and obliged for a lot of suggestions for this Teacher's Support Pack to our colleagues at the:**

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## 1. The Author

David Lindsay-Abaire was born in 1969 and grew up in the neighborhood of South Boston portrayed in *Good People*. His mom was a factory worker who loved bingo and his dad worked selling fruit from a truck. As a boy, David caught the attention of the folks at his local Boys and Girls Club who worked to get him a scholarship to the prestigious prep school, Milton Academy. At the age of 11, David left his neighborhood to attend school at Milton, from there he went to Sarah Lawrence University and then Juilliard. As a student at Juilliard, David had the opportunity to learn from playwrights like Marsha Norman and Christopher Durang. Their influences on his work can be seen in his choices to tackle difficult subjects and his tendency to infuse a great deal of wit and humor into his work.

David's first commercial hit was *Fuddy Meers* (1999) which was followed by a string of well-received works including *Wonder of the World*, and *Kimberly Akimbo*. Today, David is perhaps best known for his Pulitzer Prize winning play *Rabbit Hole* (2007). This piece represented something of a departure for David in that it dealt with a more serious and dramatic subject (the loss of a child). In addition to his plays, David Lindsay-Abaire has written a number of screenplays and the librettos for the musicals *High Fidelity* and *Shrek the Musical*.

One of his most recent works, *Good People*, draws on Lindsay-Abaire's own history as it deals with characters drawn from David's childhood neighborhood and asks questions around the idea of loyalty to place, loyalty to heritage, the widening divide between the classes in America, and what it means to move past or rise above given circumstances. For all its serious and thought-provoking subject matter, the play manages to be simultaneously funny and moving. The play has been lauded by critics and audiences and was even nominated for a Tony Award.

In a recent interview, David Lindsay-Abaire spoke about his reasons for writing *Good People*:  
*"I kept hearing over and over again about British playwrights writing about class in their country, and people were asking, where are the new American plays about class? And I asked myself, if I were to write a play on the subject, what would that be? I knew I wasn't interested in writing any didactic, message-laden play, so I put it aside for a while. Then I went back to the idea of Southie and thought, wait a minute, if I write about Southie in any way, class will inevitably bubble up to the surface."*

## 2. The Play

Set in Boston's tough, working class, Irish neighbourhood known as 'Southie', **Good People** is the powerful and ferociously funny story of a single mom who loses her job at a dollar store. Desperate to provide for her disabled adult daughter and avoid eviction, she tracks down an old flame and begs him for work. He is a successful doctor who has escaped his Southie past and lives in wealthy Chestnut Hill. Their opposing worlds collide, revealing what it means to be destitute in a culture that pursues the American dream and believes opportunity comes to those who work hard enough.

The play revolves around Margaret, a middle-aged single mother who has spent her whole life in the insular, primarily Irish area of Boston known as Southie. Margaret had to drop out of school to raise her baby as a teenager and she has spent the rest of her life since then taking care of her daughter (who though now an adult still needs full time care due to developmental disabilities). Margaret works low-wage jobs, making just enough to get by. Margaret tries to be kind (sometimes to a fault), but she is also a product of her surroundings. Southie has a reputation for its casual attitude towards racism, Irish ethnic pride, and a prevalence of crime and poverty. It's a place where people say what's on their mind and Margaret is no exception.

As the play begins we see Margaret lose her job as a cashier at the Dollar Store. Her young boss (whom she has known since he was a baby) has been ordered by upper management to let Margaret go due to her chronic tardiness. In the next scene we see her talking with her friends Jean and Dottie (who is also her landlady) trying to determine where she might be able to find a job now. Jean mentions that she ran into their old schoolmate Mikey Dillon. Margaret and Mike used to be friends and even dated for a while the summer before their senior year. Unlike Margaret, Mike finished high school, went on to college, and is now a doctor living in an affluent part of the city. Jean suggests that perhaps he might have some work for Margaret.

The meeting between Margaret and Mike becomes a turning point in the play bringing into question issues of class, social responsibility and individual needs, ideas of community, and the issues of race and gender particularly as they affect opportunities for social and financial mobility. There are attempts at reminiscing and connecting but also combative moments and accusations with Margaret calling Mike "lace-curtain Irish" at one point (meaning she thinks he has forgotten where he came from). In the end it's clear that there is no job at the office for

**Desperation meets affluence.  
When you are down to your  
last dollar, who can you count  
on?**



Margaret but eventually Mike invites Margaret to a party he and his wife are planning. Mike suggests that someone at the party may have work for Margaret and says she's welcome to come and see what she can find.

They part on good terms but when Mike calls Margaret the day before the party to tell her they're cancelling it because their daughter's sick, Margaret suspects she's being dis-invited and she decides that she's not going to take "no" for an answer. When she shows up at Mike and his wife Kate's house the next evening it's clear she's made a mistake and Mike was telling the truth about the party being cancelled. After initially mistaking Margie for the caterer come to pick up the unused party materials, Kate invites Margie in for some wine and cheese. She is curious about her husband's childhood in Southie and encourages Margaret to tell her stories about their past. In the following intense visit between three people with three very different life experiences, Margaret's stories force each of the characters to confront some of what they thought they knew about themselves and about each other. Ideals, memories, relationships, identities, and "truths" are called into question and no one leaves the conversation unscathed. A few surprising plot twists and revelations leave the audience to decide who's telling the truth, who's "in the right", and whether or not any of us has the power to decide our own fates or if we are all products of luck and circumstance.

### 3. The Setting

Margie Walsh hails from **South Boston**, or "Southie" as the local residents call it, that insular enclave of Boston's predominantly working-class Irish-Americans that retains a notoriety for toughness and ethnic pride. Southie, is a vibrant and historic area.

While being a largely working class neighborhood, Southie also maintains some of the oldest housing projects in the country. Southie can also claim some of the most beautiful spots in the city, including Castle Island and Thomas Park, which displays an American Revolutionary war monument. Its beauty, history, and unique culture have made it a popular setting for many outstanding pieces of literature and films.



Here's Tudor Street. The Lower End. This is where Margie lives.



For those old enough to remember, South Boston is the neighborhood that violently resisted school busing in the mid-1970s.

The **Boston busing crisis** (1974–1988) was a series of protests and riots that occurred in Boston, Massachusetts in response to the passing of the 1965 Racial Imbalance Act, which ordered public schools in the state to desegregate. W. Arthur Garrity Jr. of the United States District Court for the District of

Massachusetts laid out a plan for compulsory busing of students from predominantly white areas of the city to schools with predominantly black student populations. The legislation provoked outrage from white Bostonians and led to

widespread protests and violent public disturbances. The conflict lasted for over a decade and contributed to a demographic shift in Boston public schools, with dramatically fewer students enrolling in public schools and more white families sending their children to private schools instead.

Of the 100,000 enrolled in Boston school districts, attendance fell to 40,000 from 60,000 during these years. Opponents personally attacked Garrity, claiming that because he lived in a white suburb, his own children were not affected by his ruling. The author of the busing plan, Robert Dentler, lived in the suburb of Lexington, which was unaffected by the ruling. It has been noted that the children of Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis attended school in Brookline, which was also unaffected, not being part of Boston. Garrity's hometown of Wellesley welcomed a small number of black students under the METCO program that sought to assist in desegregating the Boston schools by offering places in suburban school districts to black students.



### David Lindsay-Abaire on South Boston and The Irish

"I'm obviously not a historian, but I was always told that South Boston came to be when the Irish immigrants came and were shunned in most quarters because they were thought to be filthy, dirty lowlifes, and nobody wanted them in their neighborhood. So, [the immigrants] were like, 'What about this little patch of mud,' and they went over to this uninhabited isthmus and they formed a community. Because they were so ostracized, they turned to each other for comfort and protection, and became a segregated community in every sense of the word. They took care of each other, and learned to be suspicious of outsiders, often for good reasons."



### A Timeline of Major Events in South Boston

1776: George Washington placed cannon in Dorchester Highs and forced the British out of Boston during The Revolutionary War. Castle Island was fort during The American Revolution.

1845: Potato Famine raged in Ireland. This caused a mass immigration of Irish to South Boston and other parts of the United States.

1930s: The building of housing projects began. South Boston was one of the first places in the nation to have housing projects.

1960s and 1970s: More African Americans began to move to South Boston.

1970s and 1980: The Busing Crisis and race relation problems brought national attention to South Boston.

1981: The nation's first Vietnam War Memorial was erected in South Boston.

1980s: South Boston became famous as the home of Whitey Bulger, an Irish Mob boss.

1990s : Gay and lesbian groups fought to march in the St. Patrick's Day parade, which gave the area national attention. The United States Supreme Court ruled that the business owners who organize the parade had the right to exclude the groups.

2000s: While some gentrification has begun in "Southie," the neighborhood remains primarily working- class Irish.



### 3. The Characters of the Play - Questions

#### **Margaret (Janet Greaves)**

Known to most as “Margie” (hard “g”), she is a 50-year old woman who has lived her whole life in the South end of Boston (commonly known as Southie). With a GED and no college education she has never been able to earn much more than minimum wage. She is the single mother of an adult daughter with severe developmental impairment.

Do you agree with Kate's charge that a “good mother” would have done everything she could for Joyce, even if it meant tracking down the father and having a difficult conversation?  
Does Margie maintain real friendships?  
Describe her support system.



#### **Stevie**

The son of an old schoolmate of Margie's, Stevie has also grown up in Southie but the fact that he is in the younger generation seems to give him a different perspective. He is still looking ahead, not necessarily feeling stuck. He is Margie's boss at the Dollar Store and is told to fire her in the first scene.



Stevie was born and raised in South Boston and hasn't gotten out. Do you think he is nevertheless successful? Why is it surprising the way he treats Margie? Does she deserve it?

#### **Jean (Louise Yates)**

Margie's best friend, she has the nickname “Mouthie of Southie” for her tendency to say exactly what's on her mind. She encourages Margie to go see their old classmate Mike to find out about a job.

In which way does she try to support Margie? Is she helpful?  
Jean implies that Margie and Mike were more than friends.  
What does she think happened between them?





**Dottie (Fiz Marcus)**

Margie's landlady and babysitter to Margie's daughter when Margie is at work. There is a certain amount of animosity between Dottie and Margie but their situation and backgrounds tie them together and give them at least a tenuous sort of friendship.

Dottie seems to be at odds with her daughter-in-law, Franny. Why is she angry about the way Franny treats her son, Russell? Do you think her feelings are justified? What is her attitude towards Margie?

**Michael (Kevin McGowan)**

Michael (or Mikey Dillon as he used to be known back in Southie) grew up with Margie and Jean but left South Boston to go to school and eventually became a successful doctor. He now lives in a much more affluent section of Boston with his wife and daughter.

Is Mike a "good" person? Why or why not? What might playwright Lindsay-Abaire be suggesting about what makes a good person and what makes a bad one? In what ways does Mike seem confident and self-assured? In what ways does he seem vulnerable or uncomfortable? What do you think are the reasons for these feelings?



**Kate (Gracy Goldman)**

She is Michael's wife. She comes from a well-to-do family herself and is a professor at Boston University. Margaret is surprised when she learns that Mike has married an African-American woman. The reasons for her surprise are partially a result of the insular, white Irish-Catholic identity of Southie and partially due to her own memory of a certain event in Mike's past.

Why do you think Kate is so welcoming to Margaret and by contrast why do you think Mike is not? Why and when does her attitude change? Describe Mike and Kate's relationship. Are they happy?

## 6. What is “Good People” about? Themes and Questions for Discussion!



### 6.1 Identity – staying in one's own world

Margie believes that she never had a chance to get out of South Boston. Joyce's birth brought a series of challenges that, even with unlimited resources, would have been difficult for any mother to face. But why does Margie feel trapped? Mike suggests it was her choices that sealed her fate. Mike claims that he in fact was just “lucky.” Could both perceptions be true? Was Margie's life simply predestined or does Mike's success debunk this notion of the “cycle of poverty”? Consider the idea that there may also be a “Cycle of Wealth.”

### 6.2 Missed options in life – what could have been

Mike says that Margie's life has turned out the way it has due to choices she has made. How does she explain the “choices” that she's made? Did Mike ever look back? Did he ever wonder what happened to Margie or her child or to the black boy that he beat up? Margie certainly wonders about the ‘path not taken.’ It is how she clings to hope and the way she reconciles the past. Would Mike have become a doctor if Margie stayed in his life?

### 6.3 Prejudices - judging a book by its cover

Margie assumes that she is the reason that Mike cancels his birthday party, because he fears humiliation in the event that Margie actually shows up. However, his child is ill. Why would Margie be quick to assume that she is the reason for the cancelled party? Is Margie an open-minded or accepting person herself? Consider her disapproval (although not voiced overtly) of homosexuality, interracial dating/marriage or Mike's Hispanic secretary?



- What questions are raised for the characters in the play?
- What questions are raised for you as an audience member?

## 7. Questions for more detailed written work: Perspectives on Margaret

- In the first scene of the play, Margaret relates a story to Stevie about his mother. What do you think she is trying to do in telling him this story at this time? What effect does the story have on their interaction? Later in the scene Stevie responds to Margaret's version of this story with his own memory of the same event. How is his perspective different from hers? Do you think one of them is wrong or is the difference only in the perspective?
- The play explores differences in perspective in a few different ways. For example, Margaret seems to feel that Southie is a community where people look out for each other but Mike's experience of the neighborhood doesn't seem to include this idea. Similarly Margie's friend Jean tells Margaret that she's "too nice" but Mike suggests that Margaret has in fact become "mean" and he sees this as a common trait in Southie girls. What evidence is there in the play to support these different perspectives? Why do you think the characters see things so differently?
- At what points in the play does Margaret seem inexperienced, naïve, or even ignorant? At what points does she seem witty, intelligent, and insightful? How does this complexity of character inform the story? How does it affect your experience of the play as an audience member? Is it believable? Does it pull you in or make you feel for the character or does it seem off-putting?
- In what ways does Margaret seem distrustful in the play? Are there other characters who share her lack of trust? Why do you think these characters might be wary of trusting people? In what ways does this lack of trust protect the characters and in what ways does it cause unnecessary hardship, hurt feelings, or offense?



**Johanna Nutter, Actress playing Margaret  
at the Centaur Theatre, Montreal**

Some people think acting is all about fakery. For me it's kind of the opposite; it's about getting as real as I can be. So, playing a woman from South Boston, in a play written by a South Boston native, I wanted to spend as much time there as I could. That way, when it comes time to talk about all these people and places that Margie knows, I will actually know them too. I'll have pictures and sounds and sometimes even smells to go with the words, and I'm convinced that the people in the audience will sense this somehow. In *Good People*, David Lindsay-Abaire has written a love letter to his hometown, and I want to honour that.

**Discover more about Boston  
Southie yourself !**

**See:**

<http://www.squidoo.com/southie>



## 8. Good People? Writing an essay on the title of the play!

Make a list of the characters and put their behavior in certain situations into categories (good/bad). Are some people more difficult to categorize? Who are the most complex characters in the play? Explain why it is difficult to label these people – what are the contradictions inherent in their characters?

## 9. Two worlds apart

This is a play about social class in America. Class perceptions, stereotyping and divisions permeate every scene and almost every moment. *Good People* is a telling portrait of “miserable” poor white working-class Americans encountering the world of the “comfortable” professional class.



Describe the atmosphere depicted in the two photos! Consider the home surroundings, the furniture, the body language of the three characters.

Which situation and place would you prefer for feeling at home and why?



## 10. Listening Comprehension:

See a sample from the play and listen to an interview with the author David Lindsay-Abaire and the actor Tate Donovan (playing the role of Mike in the Manhattan Theatre Club Production)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&v=YkLOiTnmw0A&NR=1>

## 11. Related Movies

You might like to explore these films with similar themes and issues:

- *The Departed* (2006)
- *The Boondock Saints* (1999)
- *Good Will Hunting* (1997)
- *Gone Baby Gone* (2007)
- *Mystic River* (2003)
- *Southie* (1999)



## 12. The production at the English Theatre Frankfurt 2013



### An Interview with the ETF director of “*Good People*”, Michael Howcroft

#### 1. What is *Good People* about?

*Good People* is a play about the choices we make in life; past, present, and future, and accepting the outcome of those choices. The play examines how our roots, upbringing, and even the smallest twists of fate can determine and shape our life and the path we follow. "Southie" is a community with a great sense of pride; the play explores how our pride can serve and protect us, but also causes a tremendous amount of hardship. The play really tackles the questions: Does everyone really have choices or not? Do we simply, accept the "cards we are dealt"? What distinguishes a selfish act versus a selfless act? The play confronts some of the hidden truths about class, status, and what defines "being comfortable" in life.

#### 2. How are you tackling this production?

The play is very close to the author's heart. He's from Southie, grew up there and has deep roots in that community. It was therefore vital to be authentic without sentimentalizing. At the same time the play contains important, universal ideas. I did a lot of research on Boston: it's recent history (particularly the forced busing), the people of Southie and the upper-middle class, privileged groups. Luckily there are a lot of films set in Boston so they provided fantastic visual references. I also read widely about the American Dream and American politics from both poles of political views. The reality of living a low-wage existence in the "land of the free" is anything but liberty. There's a great book by Barbara Ehrenreich called “*Nickel and Dimed*” which honestly documents these experiences. The play captures this feeling of entrapment acutely. All of the characters feel powerless in some form or other: financially, emotionally, socially. I wanted every element of the production to explore this in some way. I wanted the sense of anxiety to be tangible.

### 3. What are your objectives as to the style of acting and presentation of the setting?

The acting style is naturalistic and we used a form of the Stanislavski system to achieve this. We discussed objectives, events, tactics etc. I want the audience to believe they are peeking in through cracks in walls or curtains at the lives of the characters in the play. They have to be real. In rehearsal we explored the small physical details of body language to help tell the story. We are never completely clear who is telling the truth, or whose version of history is the "correct" version. We have to present these conflicts honestly to the audience without giving away any of the big secrets too soon.

The set, costume, sound and lighting design all help to support this as well as keep the action as fluid as possible. I hope the audience will feel they are inside a real Southie kitchen, a real alley, a real church basement etc. There is a lot of visual and aural researched detail in each of the spaces. Because each environment has such detail we are using the revolve to move as speedily and fluidly as possible between scenes. This also concentrates the audience focus on Margie. She never leaves the stage. She becomes a hamster in a wheel, constantly turning and working. The designer, Morgan Large, also researched Boston based artists and discovered an African American painter called Allen Rohan Crite (1910-2007) who portrayed the people and places of Boston with a loving, innocent and mythical quality. Despite the conditions the community are living in there is always hope. We've attempted to capture some of the style and composition in our staging.



"Good People" ETF " 2013

(Janet Greaves as Margie, Fiz Marcus ad Dottie and Louise Yates as Jean)

### 13. A Review by Richard Adams, 18 April 2012

#### David Lindsay-Abaire's *Good People*: The American theater rediscovers class

***Written by David Lindsay-Abaire, directed by Matt Shakman. At the Geffen Playhouse, Westwood, California through May 13.***

David Lindsay-Abaire's ***Good People*** is a terrific play—funny, moving, insightful and well constructed; played with honesty, flair and deep humanity by a cast of accomplished veterans; lavishly yet appropriately designed (by Craig Siebels); and directed (by Matt Shakman) with a sure hand and sharp eye for emotional and physical detail.

Margie's a single working mother with a severely impaired adult daughter living in a cramped flat. In scene one, she's fired (after seven warnings by her 20-something boss) from her \$9.20 an hour cashier's job at a dollar store. The reason: she's late again. Her "excuse": her landlady who babysits her daughter overslept—again—and Margie couldn't leave her child alone.

In scene two, set in Margie's kitchen, in the company of Dottie her upstairs landlady, and her best friend, Jean Margie's problems are laid out with grim humor: the possibility of finding a job, any job, is remote. A steady refrain of the play is that the only big employer in the area is the Gillette factory—but even a job on the line is unlikely given Margie's age and checkered work history.

Jean insists that Margie look up her high school boyfriend, Mike, whom Margie hasn't seen or talked to in some 30 years. Mike is now a doctor. Margie shows up at Mike's office to ask for a job. Of course, she's unqualified for anything: her "Southie" demeanor precludes her from reception, her ignorance of electronic billing disqualifies her from administrative staff and housekeeping is handled by a subcontractor.

Margie does, however, shame Mike into asking her to his birthday party at his home in Chestnut Hill, miles and a leafy world away from Southie. He obviously doesn't want her to come; she knows he doesn't, but the possibility that someone at that party might have a job for Margie is enough for her to push him into making the invitation.

When the party's cancelled, Margie is convinced that Mike's lying to her. She shows up anyway. But Mike's kid really is ill and the party has in fact been called off. Kate, Mike's young, African-American wife—a literature professor at Boston University—first mistakes Margie for one of the party-rental crew come to pick up tables and glasses. As soon as Kate realizes her mistake, her social graciousness kicks in. She invites Margie to stay for wine and cheese—much to Mike's dismay—and even eventually offers her a job as their daughter's babysitter, a prospect that her husband rejects out of hand.

In the end, the secrets and lies come out. The play's final twists are surprising and enormously satisfying without abandoning their undercurrent of the crushing burden of folk just trying to get by.

This is a play about social class in America. Class perceptions, stereotyping and divisions permeate every scene and almost every moment. *Good People* is a telling portrait of "miserable" poor white working-class Americans encountering the world of the "comfortable" professional class (words used throughout the play).

***Good People*** mines the markers of class difference for laughs and pathos. Without recounting the many crackling moments, the one that stands out most to me is when Kate, the sophisticated, African-American doctor's daughter, apologizes to Margie for only being able to pay \$15 an hour for babysitting, which, for Margie, would mean a doubling of her dollar store starting salary. For all of Kate's supposed empathy for the poor, she simply cannot understand what it means to be hanging on by a thread.

At its core, this play addresses the issues of class within a familiar, very American moral-theological framework: fate versus free will. There's a sense that the accidents of birth determine how we'll live our lives and in what circumstances. Running through this play is the theme of "luck"—underscored by a trio of scenes set in a parish hall bingo, and hammered home by Margie when she challenges Mike to admit that, despite his hard work, he was very lucky. This question is very much on Lindsay-Abaire's mind:

***"I think that one of the things that the play asks is for us to consider the myth that anyone can achieve anything if they just work hard enough. ... All the things that Mike is contending with, I have thought about. I hope that I'm a nicer person than Mike is, but a lot of what he's dealing with are things I've definitely thought about."***

What struck me, after the standing ovation and on the drive home, was that the play's working class characters, surrounded by all the social ills of poverty, never once ask why the world they live in is the way it is. No one in the play has any perspective on their condition or what keeps them there. In Lindsay-Abaire's play, the poor have been beaten into

### Assignments:



- How does is the play evaluated in this review? Do you agree?
- Which thoughts struck the author after the show?
- What puzzled him about the audience's reaction?
- How did you feel while watching ACT II?
- How did people in the auditorium around you react?
- Could you sympathize with any of the characters? Why?
- Write a review of the ETF Production and send it to: michael.gonszar@english-theatre.de



submission and the “comfortable” are unwilling to rock the boat for fear of falling back into the icy sea. No one even considers rebellion as an option.

Margie's discomfort when confronted with a plate of exotic cheeses and vintage wines in Mike and Kate's elegant living room highlights the gulf between the worlds of Chestnut Hill and Southie. This long scene, which takes up nearly the entire second act, was greeted with roars of laughter from the mostly well-heeled Geffen Playhouse audience.

This audience had fun with the Southie folk, their twisted logic, insensitive squabbling, their patois and tacky sensibilities, but once Margie's plunged into “their” world, they simply howled. Perhaps this laughter rose from deeper reservoirs of their own insecurities about their own sophistication, identifying at some level with Margie's obvious ignorance of the nuances of taste, but, I sensed a shift in mood in the playhouse, from the genial to the mean. I sensed a “laughing at” rather than a “laughing with.”

None of this is the fault of the playwright or director. However, I would love to see this play performed in a theater where the discount tickets run about \$10 and the audience is a mix of regular theatre-goers, first-timers and people who understand an hourly wage as a real-life fact. I wonder how *they* would respond to Margie's situation—and what *they* would laugh at.

Such an audience, I suspect, would have fully understood Margie's long speech in which she explains how she ended up in her current straits: because she didn't have the time or money to get a proper lunch, she snacked on peanut brittle, broke a tooth, which, because she couldn't afford a dentist, she let fester until it abscessed, then had to choose between car payments and her health; with her car repossessed, getting to work became harder and juggling childcare impossible, all of which directly led to getting fired from one low-end job after another.

I felt as if I'd visited a world in genuine crisis, and thoroughly enjoyed the comedy of manners, while remaining aware that the overall theater experience, in its own way, also spoke to the social divide dominating American life.

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**Compare:**

A review from Germany

<http://www.dradio.de/dlf/sendungen/kulturheute/1423170/>

## 14. Key issues behind the play

### 14.1 The American Dream - Introduction

**"That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement."**

The first use of the phrase "American Dream" was in James Truslow Adams's 1931 book *THE EPIC OF AMERICA*. Of course, Adams was merely naming a thread in American history that stretched from the City on a Hill to Gold Mountain. But today some critics have charged the dream has become purely materialistic — while others see its reach limited to a lucky few.

Is the American Dream a vision or an illusion? Does social change depend on personal change? What values should the U.S. demonstrate in today's world? Are there ways to think beyond geographic boundaries toward a common dream for our world.

#### **"Good People"**

questions the ideal and the reality of "the American Dream". Citizens of this country are all influenced by this concept—the idea that anyone can succeed in America just by working hard, no matter what his or her background or circumstances.

#### **Assignment:**

Check out the resources below and then discuss this idea of the American Dream with your class.



See also: <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/americandream/>

Watch and Listen: <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04302010/watch.html>

## 14.2 Keeping the Dream Alive

By Jon Meacham Thursday, TIME MAGAZINE June 21, 2012



JOHN FLOREA / TIME & LIFE PICTURES / GETTY IMAGES

The perennial conviction that those who work hard and play by the rules will be rewarded with a more comfortable present and a stronger future for their children faces assault from just about every direction. That great enemy of democratic capitalism, economic inequality, is real and growing. The unemployment rate is dispiritingly high. The nation's long-term fiscal health is at risk, and the American political system, the engine of what Thomas Jefferson called "the world's best hope," shows no sign of reaching solutions commensurate with the problems of the day.

It has not always been this way. On Friday, May 1, 1931, James Truslow Adams, a popular historian, was putting the final touches on the preface to his latest book. It was a curious time in the life of the nation. Though the Crash of 1929 had signaled the beginning of the Great Depression that was to endure for years to come, there was also a spirit of progress, of possibility. On the day Adams was finishing his manuscript, President Herbert Hoover pressed a button in Washington to turn on the lights of the newly opened Empire State Building at 34th Street and Fifth Avenue, which, at 1,250 ft., was to be the tallest building in Manhattan until the construction of the World Trade Center four decades later.

High hopes amid hard times: the moment matched Adams' thesis in his book, *The Epic of America*, a history of the nation that was to popularize a term not yet in the general vernacular in those last years of the reigns of Harding, Coolidge and Hoover.

Adams' subject, he wrote, was "that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world." It was not a new thing, this abiding belief that tomorrow would be better than today. "That dream or hope," Adams wrote, "has been present from the start."

What was new was the specific phrase Adams was using: ***the American Dream***. From John Winthrop and the Puritan search for an earthly "city upon a hill" in the New World to Benjamin Franklin's "The Way to Wealth" aphorisms to Horatio Alger and the drama of the upwardly mobile, Adams' phrase had — and has — the deepest of roots in the American experience. For reasons ranging from geography to market capitalism to Jeffersonian ideas of liberty, we may well be the only people on the planet who tend to believe without irony that Thomas Paine was right when he declared that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again."

In fact, we don't have that power. No one does. History cannot be dismissed with a nod. But from generation to generation, Americans have indeed dreamed of steady personal and national progress. In the twilight of his life, Franklin D. Roosevelt, himself one of the most accomplished purveyors of hope and dreams in American history, recalled the words of his old Groton School rector, Endicott Peabody, who had told him, "Things in life will not always run smoothly. Sometimes we will be rising toward the heights — then all will seem to reverse itself and start downward. The great fact to remember is that the trend of civilization itself is forever upward, that a line drawn through the middle of the peaks and the valleys of the centuries always has an upward trend."

Roosevelt quoted that observation in his final Inaugural Address in the winter of 1945, and in the ensuing decades, American power and prosperity reached epic heights. The Peabody-Roosevelt gospel seemed to get it right: the world was not perfect, nor was it perfectible, but the story of America was at heart the story of doing well, of conquering disease and going to the stars and defending freedom and creating wealth. By and large, Americans of the postwar era were living those "better, richer, and happier" lives that Adams had written about in the shadow of the Crash.

Whoever rises to deliver the inaugural Address of 2013 will speak to a nation in which the American Dream is under profound economic and cultural pressure. This is perhaps best measured by the state of the middle class, about which we hear so much, and with good reason: roughly 90% of Americans self-identify as middle, upper-middle or lower-middle class (2% acknowledge being "upper class"; 6% say they are "lower class").

Definitions of class are hard to come by — so much so that the U.S. Department of Commerce, on behalf of Vice President Joe Biden's White House Task Force on the Middle Class, emphasized descriptive language rather than statistics, finding that "middle-class families are defined by their aspirations more than their income. [We assume] that middle-class families aspire to homeownership, a car, college education for their children, health and retirement security and occasional family vacations."

The government's verdict: "It is more difficult now than in the past for many people to achieve middle-class status because prices for certain key goods — health care, college and housing — have gone up faster than income." Median household income has also remained stagnant for more than a decade; when the figures are adjusted for inflation, Americans are making less now than they were when Bill Clinton was in the White House.

There, in brief, is the crisis of our time. The American Dream may be slipping away. We have overcome such challenges before. To recover the Dream requires knowing where it came from, how it lasted so long and why it matters so much. Emerson once remarked that there is properly no history, only biography. This is the biography of an idea, one that made America great. Whether that idea has much of a future is the question facing Americans now.

**Read more:**

[http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2117662\\_2117682\\_2117680,00.html#ixzz2SmX9JyRP](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2117662_2117682_2117680,00.html#ixzz2SmX9JyRP)

## Assignments

**Prepare statements on the following questions and discuss in class:**

- How realistic is this concept?
- How does it serve to inspire us and how does it discourage us?
- What examples of the American dream realized can you think of?
- How do you think success is measured in this country? How do you measure success?
- What do you think the American Dream means to people today? Do you think it has changed over time?



### 14.3 The BINGO Game Money and Redemption



One of the play's **themes is luck vs. hard work**. The characters struggle with whether or not success is based on chance or diligence. Margaret argues that it is a series of unlucky events that caused her poverty; therefore, it is appropriate that she spends her days playing a game based only on luck, not on skill. Bingo is symbolic of Margaret's way of thinking.

The Southie characters like to play BINGO, a game that basically relies on luck , rather than on skill or strategy.

**Bingo** is a game of chance played with randomly drawn numbers which players match against numbers that have been pre-printed on 5x5 matrices. The matrices may be printed on paper, card stock or electronically represented and are referred to as cards. Many versions conclude the game when the first person achieves a specified pattern from the drawn numbers. The winner is usually required to call out the word "Bingo!", which alerts the other players and caller of a

possible win. All wins are checked for accuracy before the win is officially confirmed at which time the prize is secured and a new game is begun. In this version of bingo, players compete against one another for the prize or jackpot.

Bingo, appeared in the United States at county fairs in the late 1920s. It is derived from an Italian game and was first played at a Georgia carnival.

In the coming decades, Catholic churches began to house bingo games. Priests saw it as a good fund raising opportunity. However, it was and is a controversial practice because gambling is discouraged by the church. Many argue that the game is not gambling and support it because the money raised from the games goes to the church and Catholic schools.

Churches generally hold a series of games once a week. The players pay between \$5 and \$25 per night depending on how many cards they buy. There are often limits set on how many cards a person can buy. Prize money usually ranges from \$100-\$750.

## Assignments

Prepare statements on the following questions and discuss in class:

- How are the two bingo scenes in the play used symbolically?
- What do we make of the Bingo caller being the local priest?
- Margaret is unlucky at Bingo and in her life. What does this suggest?
- In the "Game of Life" is success based on hard work and ambition according to the "American Dream", or on luck and being of the right class, gender and race at birth?
- What parallel might Lindsay-Abaire be making between personal mythmaking and the American Dream, which is part of American mythology?

### 14.4 Stories and Reality

***This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he rises to live his life as if he were telling a story. (Jean-Paul Sartre)***

Throughout the play Margie tells stories about the past, and Lindsay-Abaire intentionally makes us question the truth of her stories. She seems to have a personal mythology that sustains her belief that she is a "good person" and "nice". When she tells her stories, however, the truth is always questionable. Mike also has a personal mythology that accounts for his ability to escape Southie. When both of these characters reveal their personal mythologies, naturally other characters puncture the validity of their stories and memories of the pasts.



**Discuss the questions of truth in reference to the following scene from Act II:**

## 15. A scene from Act II

MIKE

Jesus, Margie, what does that even mean? We dated for *two months!*

KATE

Be nice.

MIKE

*(To Kate)* Two months! And you heard her, *she* dumped *me!* *(Back to Margaret)* Which you didn't seem all that upset about at the time. You were with Gobie like three days later.

MARGARET

And why do you think that was?

MIKE

Because I didn't mean anything to you!

MARGARET

Wrong!

MIKE

Honestly, you've made up this thing in your head!



MARGARET Joyce wasn't premature. *(Silence. Kate looks from Margaret to Mike.)*

Janet Greaves as Margie and Gracy Goldman as Kate (ETF 2013)

MIKE

What are you doing, Margie?

KATE

What does that mean? "Joyce wasn't premature."

MARGARET

Don't say you didn't have help getting out of Southie. You had help. And not just your dad. If I hadn't let you go, you'd still be there right now.

MIKE

If you hadn't let / me go?

MARGARET

You'd be working down at the variety store with Johnny Dugger. I let you go.

MIKE

All right, Margaret. I knew you were having trouble, but I didn't realize you were pathological.

MARGARET

Joyce didn't have all those problems because she came early, she just had those problems. She was full-term. Late, in fact. I just said she was premature so Gobie would think she / was his.

MIKE

You *know* this is bullshit, Katie.

KATE

No I don't.

MARGARET

(*To Kate*) I'm sorry. I wasn't gonna say anything but-

MIKE

Was this the idea? You thought you'd come here / and-

MARGARET

I could've kept you there, that's all I'm saying. If I wanted to.

MIKE

How'd you come up with this? Were you watchin' *General Hospital* one day and think, oh, here's an angle.

MARGARET

You wanna do a blood test?

KATE

What the fuck, / Michael?

MIKE

No, I don't want to do a blood test, because that is not my / child!

MARGARET

Why would I lie?

MIKE

Why? To squeeze me for money! To pay your rent! To do everything that you can't get Gobie to do! There's a hundred reasons / for you to lie!

MARGARET

I could've trapped you. That's what girls did, you know. They'd get pregnant to trap guys.

MIKE

Is that what you're trying to do now? Because you're a little late.

MARGARET

I didn't do that to you. But I *could've*. I let you go.

MIKE

And why would you do that?

MARGARET

Because you were going off to college! Because I didn't want to be the thing that ruined your life! BECAUSE I WAS NICE!

MIKE

Oh yeah, you're a sweetheart. Shoving your way in here, making up these bullshit / stories-

MARGARET

They're not bull/shit.

You know what, Margie? It wouldn't have mattered. Even if any of this were true, which it isn't, it still wouldn't have mattered. You didn't do me any favors breaking up with me. I was gonna do it myself, but you beat me to it. You think I wanted a girlfriend when I was heading off to *college*? Do you know how many women were *at* U-Penn? We wouldn't have stayed together.

MIKE     Baby or no baby. I wouldn't have stayed.

MARGARET

Don't say that.

MIKE

I wouldn't have. No way. I'm sorry. I would've taken off anyway.



Janet Greaves as Margie and Kevin McGowan as Mike (ETF 2013)



MARGARET

No you wouldn't have. That's not who you were.

MIKE

Are you kidding? I knew Southie was a black hole before I was thirteen. I wouldn't have stayed there for anything. Not for *you*. No way. Not for some retarded baby.

KATE

*Jesus, Michael.*

MIKE

I'm sorry. But self-preservation. I would've been one of those deadbeats that take off. Just like your father took off. Just like Gobie took off. That would've been me.

MARGARET

You're just saying that.

MIKE

Why?

MARGARET

I don't know why, but I don't believe you.

MIKE

*(Lunging at her)* AND I DON'T BELIEVE YOU!

KATE

*(Blocking his way)* STOP IT, MICHAEL!

*(Silence.)*

MARGARET

There he is. There's still a little Southie in there.

MIKE

Too far, Margie. I know you're desperate but this is too far.

MARGARET

*(After a beat, more to herself)* You were gonna dump me anyway. *(Beat)* That's a mean thing to say, Mikey.

MIKE

Why?

MARGARET

Because it means that nothing woulda been different. That there really *was* nothing I coulda done to get outta there. *(Beat)* It's a pretty fucking depressing thought. That's why.

*(Margaret gets her coat on.)*

*(To Kate as she goes)* I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-- I shouldn't have / come here.

KATE

*(Stops her)* Why didn't you come find him earlier? *(Beat)* If the baby stuff is true-

MARGARET

It *is* true.

KATE

Then why didn't you come find him?

MARGARET

I told you. Because ... I didn't want- Because ...

KATE

Because it was the nice thing to do. To let him go.

MARGARET

Yeah.

KATE

*(Beat)* But that doesn't sound nice to me. Not for your daughter, at least.

MARGARET

My daughter?

KATE

You talk about how hard it's been and how you've struggled with her all these years-

MARGARET

*I have.*

KATE

Why? If you didn't have to struggle, why *would* you? Because you didn't want to inconvenience Mike?

MARGARET

No, that's / not-

## 16. Age Discrimination in *Good People*

**Age discrimination is a theme** within the play. Because Margaret has worked at the Dollar Store for years, she made more money than the younger employees. She believes that this was a component in her firing. She also believes that she is not hireable because of her age.

The Age Discrimination Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA), protects people who are 40 years of age or older from discrimination in the workplace. However, recent data shows that many companies may be ignoring the law.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that workers over the age of 45 are staying unemployed longer than younger workers. *The New York Times* reports that "On average, laid-off workers in this age group were out of work 22.2 weeks in 2008, compared with 16.2 weeks for younger workers. Even when they finally land jobs, they typically experience a much steeper drop in earnings than their younger counterparts."

Stereotypes that older people are not as good with technology, a close retirement date, and more health problems can cause a company hire a younger person.

*The New York Times* reported that a study was conducted and published in 2005. Professors sent out 4,000 résumés on behalf of hypothetical job-seeking women ranging in age from 35 to 62 for entry-level jobs at companies." Coincidentally, some of the companies were in Boston. The professors "changed only the applicant's high school graduation year, an age indicator" and "found that workers under 50 were more than 40 percent more likely to be called for an

## 17. Unfamiliar Words and Phrases from *Good People*

**Aunt Clara:** A character in the television show “Bewitched.” She is known for her well-intentioned spells backfiring.

**Biddies** - Elderly women who are usually looked at as annoying.

**Cracker Barrel Cheese:** An inexpensive brand of cheese.

**Djembe:** An African drum.

**Granny Cart:** A shopping cart that contains a homeless person's belongings.

**Humboldt Fog:** A brand of expensive cheese. It can cost as much as \$140.

**Lace Curtain Irish:** A wealthy and arrogant Irish-American.

**Reproductive Endocrinologist:** A doctor who treats infertility.

**Tara:** A plantation house in *Gone with the Wind*.

**Upton Sinclair:** A famous Twentieth Century writer who wrote investigative books like *The Jungle*.

**VFW:** Veterans of Foreign War.

**Welly Cheese:** Free cheese given by the government.

**Wensleydale Cheese:** A crumbling cheese that is usually combined with cranberries.

## 18. Notes on Mature Content

*Good People* is an example of modern naturalism. This style of play attempts to portray life as it is with characters who look and act the way that people do in real life. Because of this, there is some mature language in this performance. The characters are meant to be accurate representations of people living in what is known as a somewhat rough and tumble area of Boston. The words they use reflect this atmosphere and some of the words they use are ones which would be deemed inappropriate for use in school.

This area of South Boston also has a reputation for its lack of diversity and for being unfriendly to anyone not of white, Irish-Catholic background. This aspect of Southie comes out in the form of several racial slurs throughout the play and the issue of racial prejudices is addressed within the play.

Finally, the play does involve the issue of teen pregnancy. Margaret was in high school when she conceived her daughter. The repercussions of being a teen mother have in many ways shaped the rest of her life. Students should be aware that the use of language and the issues addressed in this play are there to give us an understanding of the characters and the situations they find themselves in and/or create through the course of the action.

The play is not making a statement about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the language used or the issues or ideas expressed. Rather the playwright is simply offering the audience what he views as a realistic set of characters and a realistic portrayal of how these characters would behave and speak given the circumstances and events in the play.







