

YES,
PRIME
MINISTER
- STUDY GUIDE -

PM

GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

YES, PRIME MINISTER

AMERICAN PREMIERE IN THE
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

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SPECIAL THANKS TO

**Ken Novice, Randall Arney, Amy Levinson, Ellen Catania,
Brian Dunning, Kristen Smith and Resa Nikol**

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This publication is to be used for educational purposes only.

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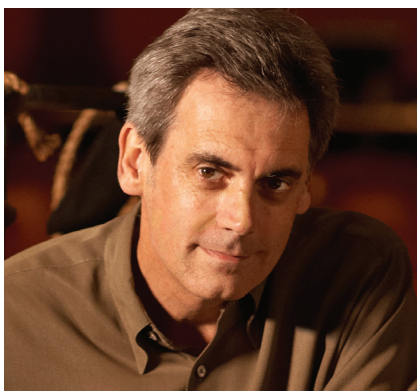
SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION



ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



It is my pleasure to welcome writers Jonathan Lynn, Antony Jay and *Yes, Prime Minister* to the Geffen Playhouse. Having been a fan of the television show and the subsequent stage adaptation, I jumped at the chance to bring the American premiere to Los Angeles.

As far back as Shakespeare, the English have had an uncanny knack for dramatizing the foibles of their own political system. Creating a microcosm for the larger world of politics, sex, deceit (and everything else that makes a good play), writers Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay have used farce, comedy, and tragedy to tell stories that reach far beyond their shores into the macrocosm of world politics. The comedy and/or farce contained within *Yes, Prime Minister* is a perfect picture of the lines that are crossed for the sake of the “greater good” and of course, for re-election.

From the minds of two incredibly talented men, their first series *Yes Minister* premiered as a BBC series in 1980 and was followed up with *Yes, Prime Minister* in 1986. The ongoing popularity of these two series and the subsequent adaptation of *Yes, Prime Minister*, which enjoyed great success in London, speaks to the fact that very little changes in politics other than the names of one’s allies and enemies. Lynn and Jay have created a hilarious group of unscrupulous characters who find themselves in an international pickle.

As co-author and creator, Jonathan Lynn expertly directs this production, which boasts an incredibly talented ensemble of actors and designers who together bring the heart of the English politicos to the stage.

PLAY SYNOPSIS & SETTING

SYNOPSIS

In this satire, fresh from an acclaimed run in London's West End, a beleaguered Prime Minister, scheming Cabinet Secretary, morally confused Principal Private Secretary and beautiful but ruthless Head of the PM's Policy Unit lurch from crisis to crisis, trying to survive a disastrous weekend that teeters on the edge of catastrophe despite their best (and worst) intentions. Will they manage to save the Euro from collapsing, resolve the energy crisis, solve the debt crisis, hide an embarrassing illegal immigrant, control the media and avoid public humiliation?

SETTING

The Prime Minister's study at Chequers, his official country residence.

ACT I

Scene 1: Late Friday afternoon; Scene 2: After dinner, that evening

ACT 2

Scene 1: A moment later; Scene 2: Sunday morning

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

JONATHAN LYNN (Playwright and Director)

Lynn's West End theater debut, aged 23, was as Motel the Tailor in the original London cast of *Fiddler on the Roof*. London directing credits include: *The Glass Menagerie* working with Tennessee Williams; *Songbook* (Best Musical, Society of West End Theatres Award and Evening Standard Award); *Anna Christie* (RSC, Stratford and the Donmar); Joe Orton's *Loot*; *Pass The Butler* by Eric Idle, Shaw's *Arms And The Man* and *The Gingerbread Man* (Old Vic, two successive Christmas seasons). At the National Theatre, Lynn directed *A Little Hotel on the Side* by Georges Feydeau and *Three Men on A Horse* (Society of West End Theatres Award, Best Comedy). As artistic director of the Cambridge Theatre Company, Lynn directed 20 productions, producing 20 others, 9 of which transferred to the West End. Film directing includes the cult classic *Clue* (also wrote the screenplay), *Nuns on the Run* (also written by Lynn), *My Cousin Vinny*, *The Distinguished Gentleman*, *Sgt. Bilko*, *Greedy*, *Trial And Error*, *The Whole Nine Yards*, *The Fighting Temptations* and most recently, *Wild Target*. For television, Lynn's writing credits include dozens of episodes of various comedy series, creating and starring *My Brother's Keeper* and the phenomenally successful, multi-award-winning BBC series *Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*, co-written and created with Antony Jay. Lynn authored *The Complete Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister Volumes I and II*, which cumulatively sold more than a million copies in hardback and have been translated into numerous languages and are still in print nearly 30 years later. His new book, *Comedy Rules* (Faber and Faber) received rave reviews. Lynn received an MA in Law from Cambridge University and describes himself as a recovering lawyer.

ANTONY JAY (Playwright)

Sir Antony Jay has enjoyed a distinguished career as writer, broadcaster and producer. He was a founder member and became editor of the BBC's legendary *Tonight* program and is founder-editor of *The Oxford Dictionary of Political Quotations* and author of *Elizabeth R* and two acclaimed documentaries on the royal family. He is a commander of the Royal Victorian Order. His books include two management classics *Management and Machiavelli* and *Corporation Man*. Antony Jay co-founded (with John Cleese) Video Arts Ltd and was chairman from 1972 to 1989. The company won over 100 national and international awards for its comedy training films and won the Queen's Award to Industry in 1982. Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay's BAFTA Award-winning political comedy *Yes Minister* first aired on BBC2 in 1980 and ran until 1984 (three series). The sequel, *Yes, Prime Minister*, ran from 1986 until 1988 (two series). Both series are now released in their entirety on BBC DVD. Lynn and Jay also wrote three novels, *The Complete Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*, volumes one and two; which cumulatively sold more than one million copies in hardback, were on the British top 10 bestseller list for three years and have been translated into numerous languages.

SECTION 2

THEMES & TOPICS

THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

RED BOXES

Red Boxes are referred to in the play's dialogue and used as props in the production. Similar in appearance to a briefcase, they are primarily used by British ministers to hold and transport documents.

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-UKGov

tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-UKPolitics

tinyurl.com/BritSystem

tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-PM

Photo: Parliament

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Yes, *Prime Minister* takes place within the British system of government, which is a “democracy governed within the framework of a constitutional monarchy.” The reigning monarch heads the state in a largely ceremonial role. Power lies with **Parliament**, which is composed of two legislative chambers: the **House of Commons**, whose members are elected by and represent citizens; and the **House of Lords**, to which most members are appointed for life.

Unlike America's system of government, which has a separation of powers among the executive, legislative and judicial branches, the British government is led by whichever political party has the most Members of Parliament (**MPs**) elected to the House of Commons. In the absence of a strong majority, a coalition government is formed.

The **Prime Minister**, usually the leader of the dominant political party, serves as the head of the government and appoints **Ministers** drawn from both houses of Parliament to the **Cabinet**. The **Civil Service**, a permanent bureaucracy that the Prime Minister oversees, implements the executive decisions of the Cabinet.

Yes, *Prime Minister* highlights the struggles between a prime minister, who is trying to avoid disaster and remain popular, and the civil servants seeking to “assist” him in ways that promote their interests.

DISCUSSION POINT

How are the British and American systems of government similar and different? In which would you prefer to participate as a citizen? Why?

THE EUROPEAN UNION

EXCHANGE RATES

Currently, one euro equals \$1.29 in U.S. dollars; the English pound is worth \$1.51.

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/EUFacts

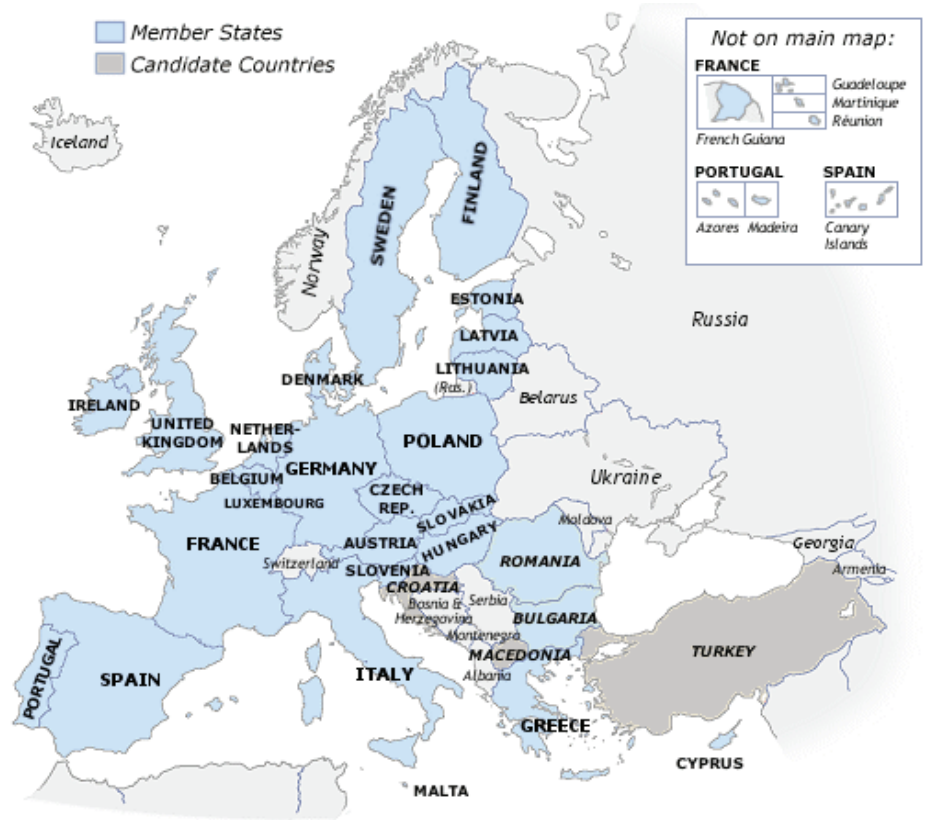
tinyurl.com/EuroFacts

Photo: EU Map

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Photo: Euro Notes

The image below depicts a euro banknote. This design is copyrighted by the European Central Bank (ECB), and its use is permitted by ECB, subject to the conditions set forth in decisions ECB/2003/4 and ECB/2003/5 of 20 March 2003 and “as long as reproductions in advertising or illustrations cannot be mistaken for genuine banknotes”.



In the play, the Prime Minister is presented with a plan for accepting a loan from a foreign government that will help the economy of the **European Union** and save the conference he is leading from falling apart.

The European Union, also referred to as the **EU**, is the economic and political partnership shared by 27 European countries, including the United Kingdom (U.K.), which encompasses Great Britain – England, Scotland, Wales – and Northern Ireland. The purpose of the European Union is to advance cooperation, peace, economic prosperity and political power among and for participating countries.



THE EURO

When pressured to accept the foreign loan in the currency used by many of the countries in the European Union, the Prime Minister resists “joining the euro.” The United Kingdom is one of 10 countries that does not use the **euro**, and the Prime Minister is concerned the U.K. will lose its autonomy if it changes its currency.

SATIRE



Photo: *The Laughing Audience (or A Pleased Audience)*, by William Hogarth (Public Domain)

IRONY

The use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning. (merriam-webster.com)

SOURCES

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire

Satire exposes shortcomings and follies in human affairs, by ridiculing them in witty, outrageous, and ironic ways. Used in literature, theatre, the graphic arts and cartoons throughout history, and in commentary and comedy in TV, film and on the Web, satire often aims to make us laugh and always seeks to make us think.

In government, the writers of *Yes, Prime Minister*, have rich targets, particularly the lack of scruples of politicians who are driven by self-interest, expediency, and fear in their pursuit of power, and the entrenched incompetence of government bureaucracies.

Prime Minister Jim Hacker, with his Private Secretary Bernard standing by, confronts his advisor, Cabinet Secretary Sir Humphrey Appleby, about the staffing of government departments with “historians and literature graduates.” Sir Humphrey, a civil servant, is pleased to observe they are “Men with the wisdom of the ages.” Jim argues they are “amateurs.”

JIM

We should have teachers at the Department of Education, doctors and nurses at the Department of Health, accountants and actuaries at the Treasury. Experts. People who actually know what needs to be done.

HUMPHREY

I think that would be very dangerous.

JIM

I want advice from real people, who live in the real world doing the real jobs.

HUMPHREY

Prime Minister, you’re striking at the very heart of our whole system of government. Our success is founded upon staying free from the taint of professionalism. And the corruption of specialist knowledge. You’re not seriously...it’s out of the question...you wouldn’t really do this? Would he Bernard?

Bernard shrugs helplessly.

As we follow the Prime Minister from crisis to crisis, the play mocks how politicians seek the approval of celebrities, try to escape being criticized in the press and consider meeting the sordid sexual requests of foreign dignitaries in exchange for money and oil. It also makes fun of civil servants who use impenetrable jargon to avoid taking positions or action.

HUMPHREY

(laughs mirthlessly)

Very droll, dear lady. Prime Minister...I agree that there are aspects of the organization and administration of the public sector which could certainly benefit from measured consideration in the context of changing circumstances and the structural metamorphosis precipitated by the current austerity imperatives, so to that end I would propose setting up a series of interdepartmental committees...

DISCUSSION POINT

What attitudes, behavior, or commentary are ripe for satire in American politics?

FROM TELEVISION TO THE STAGE

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-YesPM

Yes, Prime Minister Program – “The Latest British Invasion: The Politics and Personalities of *Yes, Prime Minister*. An Interview with Jonathan Lynn”

Photo: TV Set

© Bjoertvedt / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-3.0

The play *Yes, Prime Minister*, which premiered in Britain in 2010, is based on a popular British television series also written by Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay. *Yes, Minister* aired from 1980-1984; its sequel, *Yes, Prime Minister*, ran from 1986-1988.

As they have done in the play, Lynn and Jay chose not to identify a governing political party – Conservative or Labour – in the television show. To their surprise, the very people they thought would take offense at their satirical take on government – politicians and civil servants of all persuasions – ended up loving it.



DISCUSSION POINT

Who are prominent satirists in today's popular culture? How do they make fun of their subjects?

COMIC ACTING

FARCE

A comic dramatic work using buffoonery and horseplay and typically including crude characterization and ludicrously improbable situations.
(oxforddictionaries.com)

Great comic actors are dead serious about being funny. They invest themselves fully – emotionally, mentally, and physically – in going after what their character wants, no matter how ridiculous their personality or situation. They also listen and react to what is happening in the moment.

While comic actors are often skilled improvisers, they usually work with well-crafted scripts, such as *Yes, Prime Minister* – a satire with elements of farce. To actively explore its sharp humor, read through the following scene. Join up with a partner and decide who will read which role. Before enacting the scene, decide what your character wants. Read the scene aloud with your partner several times, infusing each line of dialogue with authentic feeling as you listen and respond to each other.

HUMPHREY

Did you tell the Prime Minister about joining the euro?

BERNARD

Absolutely not, Sir Humphrey. You told me not to.

HUMPHREY

Well, what put him onto it?

BERNARD

Perhaps it was his Special Adviser.

HUMPHREY

That woman! How did she get to Chequers without our knowing?

BERNARD

I expect he called her on his Blackberry.

HUMPHREY

Bernard! You're letting him make his own appointments? If you lose control over his diary, you lose control over him! You never know where it'll end. He'll start running the country.

BERNARD

He can't. He doesn't know how to.

HUMPHREY

Of course he doesn't. So he must be stopped.

DISCUSSION POINT

What did you learn about comic acting and writing by bringing the scene to life?

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEN NOVICE

What is your official title at the Geffen Playhouse?

I am the Managing Director.

How would you describe your primary responsibilities?

My job is to create an environment in which great art can happen. That environment is made up of the financial, cultural, managerial and administrative aspects of our organization. And, that environment allows for everyone to work together, in the same direction to shared goals. It's also my responsibility to see that individuals have the financial, human and informational resources they need to do their work. On a more micro level, I'm here to help individuals attain their professional goals and to conduct the business of the theater, such as negotiating legal contracts.

How did you get into the field of theatre management?

I took acting as an undergraduate at Penn State. When a professor learned I was especially interested in publicizing our productions, he opened up the world of theatre administration to me. After graduation, I went to New York and assisted a publicist at Circle Repertory Theatre. At a business that was both an ad agency and theatre management and production company, I assisted the advertising team as well as the producer, which laid the foundation for what I do now.

In what other ways have you been involved in higher education?

While attending the University of Colorado and San Diego State, I earned my M.B.A. More recently, I developed and taught in an M.F.A./M.B.A. Theatre Management program at Cal State Long Beach, which offers career options to those who are passionate about theatre but do not necessarily want to act, direct or design.

Where else have you worked?

I was a publicist at the Denver Center Theatre Company then branched out into marketing at the Old Globe in San Diego, where I was mentored by its marketing director, Joe Kobryner. He'd worked with Danny Newman, who created an innovative approach to building audiences through subscriptions, which is considered standard practice today. Eventually, I became marketing director at the Old Globe. Later I held a position at Pasadena Playhouse that gave me the opportunity to manage the full range of theatre administration right before Gil Cates asked me to work here.

What's the difference between public relations and marketing?

Both are about engaging people as active audience members, but publicists go after free publicity by, say, convincing a journalist to write a feature story; in marketing, you generally pay for exposure to potential audiences.



How is non-profit theatre different from commercial theatre?

In non-profit theatre we are mission-driven. Our success is defined by whether or not we have provided high quality experiences in theatre to our audiences. In commercial enterprises, success is measured by how much money you make.

What might audiences not know about the business side of running a theater?

How creative it is. Just as those on the artistic side – like a director – make any number of creative choices in putting on a play, so do we on the business side come up with and select possible actions that will lead to a successful outcome in, for example, negotiating a contract with an agent.

In addition to having a hit show, what makes a theater successful?

Building a first-class national profile through exposure in the media or through national colleagues sharing their positive experiences at the Geffen paints a positive picture about our theater. This picture helps us bring the best theatrical experiences to our Los Angeles audiences as well audiences nationally and internationally.

What do you find most meaningful about your job?

Interacting with the people in our organization to fulfill our mission. I also care deeply about reaching and inspiring young people through our education programs.

What do you find most challenging?

It is always a challenge to support our mission financially. As I work with the Geffen's hard-working staff members, they motivate me to find solutions that will not only ensure our fiscal health, but will also help us expand our repertoire and grow our education programs in the future. ■

SECTION 4

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and members' interests, guide your group to respond to the questions suggested below. Encourage everyone to participate, while having respect for differing opinions. Individuals can share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Then, ask for a volunteer to share their group's answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching the play? Engaged? Provoked? Intrigued? Put off? What made you feel this way?
- How did you feel about the characters? To whom did you relate the most? Who was most appealing, unlikeable, sympathetic, or funny? Why?
- Why is *Yes, Prime Minister* considered a satire, with elements of farce?
- How well did the play succeed in hooking and sustaining your attention? What didn't work for you?
- What did you learn about the British system of government?
- How did the play confirm, enhance, or alter your view of politics and current issues – in America and the world?
- What did you appreciate about the performances? Share the details.
- What was the funniest moment in the play? Describe it in detail.
- How did the set, props, costumes, and lighting contribute to the impact of the play?
- How would you capture in 2-3 sentences what the play is about?

NOTES

SECTION 5

RESOURCES

LEARN ABOUT the British system of government at tinyurl.com/GovUKFacts, the differences between British and American government systems at tinyurl.com/CompareUKUS and the European Union at tinyurl.com/EUFacts.

LEARN ABOUT the history and different forms of satire at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire.

LEARN ABOUT the TV series *Yes, Prime Minister*, upon which the play is based, at tinyurl.com/BBC-YPMInfo.

WATCH episodes of *The Colbert Report*, which satirizes American cable news, outsized media personalities and current events, at colbertnation.com.

LEARN ABOUT the contributions of British culture to life in Los Angeles through events sponsored by BritWeek. Visit current.britweek.org for information.

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PricewaterhouseCoopers

Queen Nefertari Productions

Shay Family Foundation

Sidley Austin Foundation

Simms/Mann Family Foundation

Simon Strauss Foundation

Skirball Foundation

Sony Pictures Entertainment

Stone Family Foundation

The Walt Disney Company

Transamerica Foundation

UCLA Dream Fund

Union Bank Foundation

Universal Studios

US Bank

W Hotel – Westwood

Warner Bros. Entertainment

Wells Fargo Foundation

Westfield Group

Enriching Lives



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