

# THE GIFT

## STUDY GUIDE



GEFFEN  
PLAYHOUSE



## SECTION 1

# ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

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## PLAY SYNOPSIS & SETTING

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### SYNOPSIS

When two couples meet while vacationing, they instantly transition from strangers to the best of friends. Despite their differences – Ed and Sadie are middle-aged, rich and traditional, while Martin and Chloe are young artists glowing with their potential to change the world – they find themselves spending the rest of their week together. When a seemingly inconsequential event throws both their lives into a tailspin, the couples find themselves wrestling with a moral dilemma: while it's human nature to want what you don't have, is it unnatural to abandon something that you do have?

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### SETTING

The play takes place in an expensive tropical resort and the home of Ed and Sadie.

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

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*In order of appearance*

Sadie ..... **Kathy Baker**  
Ed ..... **Chris Mulkey**  
Chloe ..... **Jaime Ray Newman**  
Martin ..... **James Van Der Beek**

# PRODUCTION CREDITS

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Written by  
**Joanna Murray-Smith**

Scenic Designer  
**Derek McLane**

Costume Designer  
**Laura Bauer**

Lighting Designer  
**Peter Kaczorowski**

Sound Designer  
**John Gromada**

Media Designer  
**Howard Werner**

Production Stage Manager  
**Mary Michele Miner**

Assistant Stage Manager  
**Gary J. Breitbach**

Casting by  
**Phyllis Schuringa**

Dramaturg  
**Amy Levinson**

Directed by  
**Maria Aitken**

The first performance of *The Gift* was presented by  
Melbourne Theatre Company on May 28, 2011

# THEMES & TOPICS

## CHANCE ENCOUNTERS CHANGING LIVES

A central theme in *The Gift* is how chance meetings can change lives. As one of the characters, Martin, says, “All of us are living a narrative in which a chance encounter or moment becomes the author of our future.”

In the play, two couples meet at a resort. Ed and Sadie are there to honor their twenty-five year marriage. While dining in the resort’s restaurant, they notice Martin and Chloe celebrating their eighth wedding anniversary and invite the young couple to join them for a drink. The couples bond as they discover shared interests and navigate their differences. A key event draws them even closer and leads to a completely unexpected next step in their lives.

### DISCUSSION POINT

Think of an unexpected meeting with someone – in school, in your neighborhood, while traveling – that ended up having a strong impact on your life. Whom did you meet, where were you, what happened, and how did the encounter change your life?

## RELATIONSHIPS

In *The Gift*, two married couples become friends. Their feelings towards each other, as spouses and friends, change as the play unfolds.

### DISCUSSION POINT

How can we tell what kind of relationships people have? How do we know if they are close, distant, or hostile? What behaviors reveal how they feel about each other?



Jaime Ray Newman, Chris Mulkey, James Van Der Beek, Kathy Baker in *The Gift*. Photo by Michael Lamont.

## CHOICES & RESPONSIBILITIES

In *The Gift*, Martin's commitment to his creativity as an artist is pitted against his responsibilities in life. When Ed strongly questions a choice Martin is about to make, he argues, "We make mistakes, of course we do. We make choices and they're the wrong choices. We fall into things and they're ... wrong for us. *But we see it through.*"

### DISCUSSION POINT

How do our choices in the present affect our future?

What does it mean to take responsibility for our mistakes? When is it better to change course and not see our choices through?

## EXPERIENCING ART

### CONCEPTUAL ART

In Conceptual art, the idea that a work conveys is considered more important than its visual appearance. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), who questioned the conventional values of the art world in the early 1900s, is considered the father of the art form. Conceptual art became popular in the 1960s. Artists were interested in prompting people to think or make meaning from their art, rather than creating art objects for collecting. Over time, the term has come to include non-traditional genres such as performance art and video art.

For a vibrant example of Conceptual art, visit [tinyurl.com/MoMA-Kosuth](https://tinyurl.com/MoMA-Kosuth)

### SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/ArtLex-Conceptual](https://tinyurl.com/ArtLex-Conceptual)

[tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-Conceptual](https://tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-Conceptual)

As they first get to know each other, Ed, who has enjoyed great success in the woodworking machinery business, struggles to understand what Martin does for a living as a conceptual artist.

Martin attempts to help Ed understand his profession by describing his latest artwork. When Ed asks what it means, Martin responds:

MARTIN

It means what you give it to mean, Ed. You give it its meaning. When you think about it, Ed, each of us bestows a kind of narrative on the world around us. Our presence alters it. It's not the same before us as it is when we pass through. We shake up the air. It's an improvisation.

One year later the two couples meet again. Ed describes how exciting it's been to experience Martin's work and how much he now loves contemporary art.

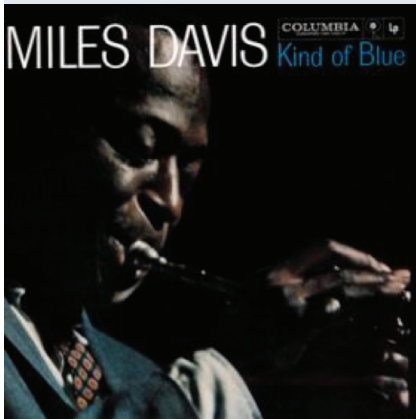
### DISCUSSION POINT

How has art affected your life? Describe what you experienced and the impact it had on the way you think and feel about yourself, others, or the world.



# IMPROVISATION

Improvisation is the act of making things up on the spot. In jazz, musicians create melodies over repeating chords and rhythms. In theater, actors collaborate to invent and perform stories.



## IMPROVISATION IN JAZZ

In *The Gift*, new friends Ed and Martin connect through their love of jazz. Later, Martin gives Ed *Kind of Blue*, an album created by jazz legend Miles Davis (1926-1991). Along with himself on trumpet, musicians on the recording included tenor saxophonist John Coltrane; alto saxophonist Julian “Cannonball” Adderley; pianists Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly; bassist Paul Chambers; and drummer Jimmy Cobb. *Kind of Blue*, created in 1959, is one of the best-selling jazz recordings of all time. In 2009, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a symbolic resolution to declare the album a national treasure. Its popularity is credited to its simplicity and use of a new kind of music improvisation.

## SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/NPR-MilesDavis](http://tinyurl.com/NPR-MilesDavis)

[tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-MilesDavis](http://tinyurl.com/Wikipedia-MilesDavis)

## IMPROVISATION IN THEATER

In improvisational theater, characters, dialogue, and the story are created in the moment, with minimal planning, as the performance unfolds. Improvisational theater encompasses a range of styles; some focus on developing comic sketches, while in others actors aim to create longer stories.

In addition to producing theater works, improvisation is sometimes used to develop characters and scripts in film and television, to train actors, and as a tool for communication and collaboration in education and business.

## DISCUSSION POINT

Improvisation skills include being able to tap into your imagination and other resources, listening and being responsive to others, and being open to and selective about possibilities – all of which can help us meet challenges.

How have you used improvisation skills when faced with an unexpected problem?

How might these skills help you succeed in life?

## SECTION 4

# POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What was the most memorable moment in the play? Describe it in detail.
- What was the gift Martin and Chloe wanted from Ed and Sadie? How did their request make you feel? If you were Ed or Sadie, how would you have responded? Why?
- How did Ed and Sadie and their marriage change as a result of their encounters with Martin and Chloe?
- What did you learn from experiencing the play?
- What did you appreciate about the performances?
- How did the sets, costumes, and lighting contribute to the mood of the play?
- What did you enjoy most and least about the play? Why?





## SECTION 5

# RESOURCES

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**VISIT** contemporary art exhibitions at the

- Los Angeles County Art Museum (LACMA) – [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)
  - Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) – [www.moca.org](http://www.moca.org)
  - Bergamot Station Arts Center – [www.bergamotstation.com](http://www.bergamotstation.com)
  - Santa Monica Museum of Art (SMMoA) – [www.smmao.org](http://www.smmao.org)
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**READ ABOUT** Conceptual art in California:

[tinyurl.com/BAM-CAConceptual](http://tinyurl.com/BAM-CAConceptual) offers an overview of a Pacific Standard Time exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum.

[tinyurl.com/SanDiego-CAConceptual](http://tinyurl.com/SanDiego-CAConceptual) links to a Los Angeles Times review of a recent exhibition that focused on Southern California's roots in Conceptual art.

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**LEARN ABOUT** jazz legend Miles Davis at [tinyurl.com/PBS-MilesDavis](http://tinyurl.com/PBS-MilesDavis).

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**WATCH AND LISTEN TO** Miles Davis at [www.milesdavis.com/us/videos](http://www.milesdavis.com/us/videos).

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**READ ABOUT** improvisational techniques in *Improvisation for the Theater* by Viola Spolin (Northwestern University Press, 1999).

# THE GIFT

AMERICAN PREMIERE IN THE  
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

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STUDY GUIDE WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

**Jennifer Zakkai**

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