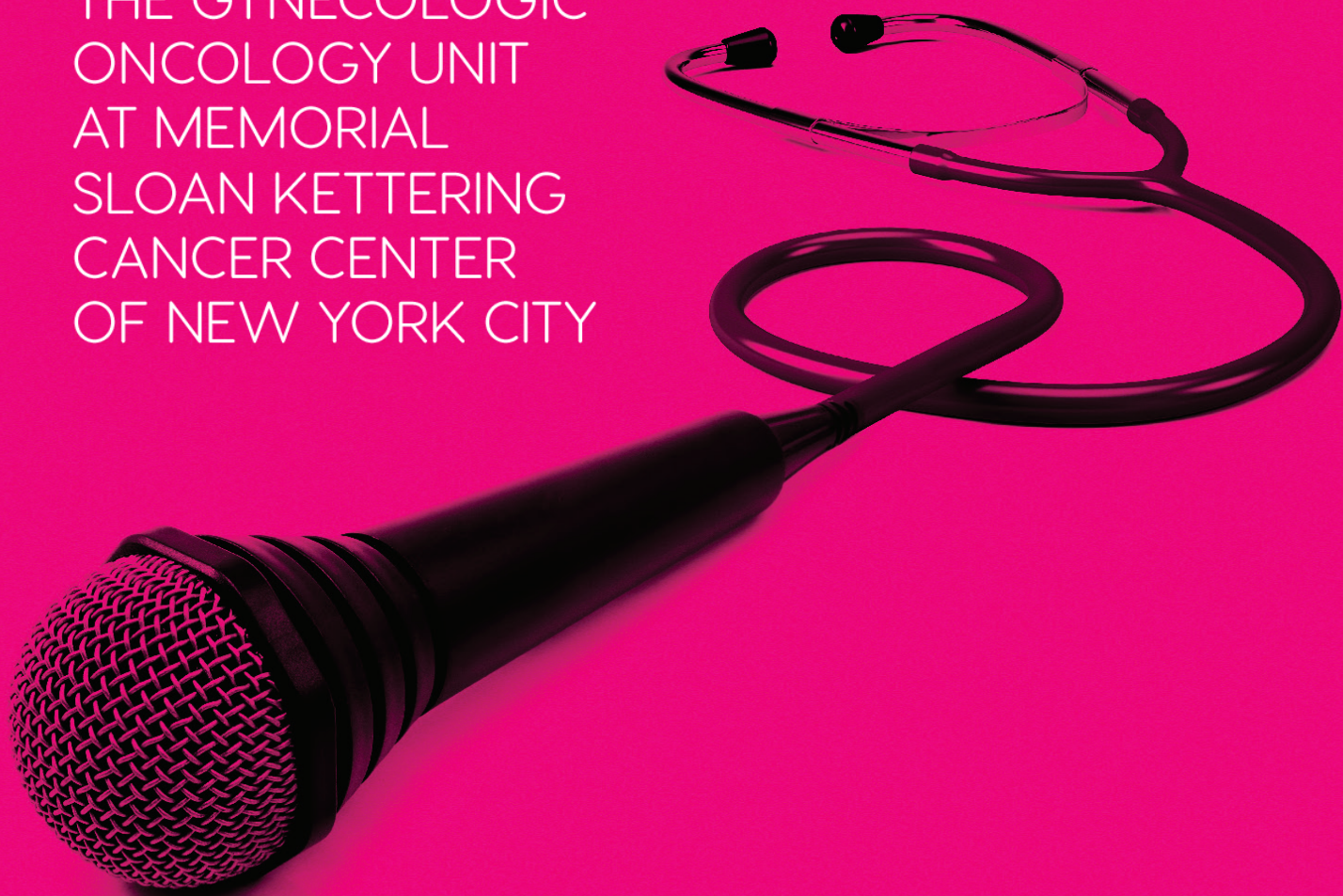


STUDY GUIDE

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED

ON THE WAY TO
THE GYNECOLOGIC
ONCOLOGY UNIT
AT MEMORIAL
SLOAN KETTERING
CANCER CENTER
OF NEW YORK CITY



**GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE**

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED

ON THE WAY TO THE GYNECOLOGIC
ONCOLOGY UNIT AT MEMORIAL SLOAN KETTERING
CANCER CENTER OF NEW YORK CITY

WEST COAST PREMIERE IN THE
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE
SEPTEMBER 5 - OCTOBER 8, 2017

SPECIAL THANKS TO

**Randall Arney, Amy Levinson, Brian Dunning, Rachel Weigardt-Egel,
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STUDY GUIDE WRITTEN AND COMPILED BY

Jennifer Zakkai

This publication is to be used for educational purposes only.

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SECTION 1

ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED

ON THE WAY TO THE GYNECOLOGIC ONCOLOGY UNIT AT MEMORIAL SLOAN KETTERING CANCER CENTER OF NEW YORK CITY



WRITTEN BY

Halley Feiffer

DIRECTED BY

Trip Cullman

SCENIC DESIGNER

Lauren Helpern

COSTUME DESIGNER

David Kay Mickelsen

LIGHTING DESIGNER

Matthew Richards

SOUND DESIGNER

Darron L West

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER

Ross Jackson

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

Jade Cagalawan

CASTING DIRECTOR

Phyllis Schuringa, CSA



Halley Feiffer as Karla



Jason Butler Harner as Don



Eileen T'Kaye as Geena



JoBeth Williams as Marcie

SYNOPSIS

In this outrageous and touching romantic comedy, twenty-something Karla is working on her raunchy stand-up comedy routine while her mother Marcie is asleep in a hospital room, after undergoing surgery to treat endometrial cancer. On the other side of the curtain that divides the room, Don, in his late forties, has come to visit his mother Geena, who is quite ill with ovarian cancer and also asleep. After a few moments of listening to Karla's act in incredulous silence, Don objects strongly. Instead of backing off, she hurls insults at him. Their hostile exchange escalates until Don suddenly breaks into laughter, which eases the tension between them. Over the next few days, they admit to painful life experiences, which lessens Karla's defensiveness and Don's despair. Their growing intimacy allows Karla to face her strained relationship with her acid-tongued mother, who in turn benefits from her daughter's newly revealed vulnerability.

SETTING A hospital room in the Gynecologic Oncology Unit at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center of New York City.

RUNNING TIME Approximately 80 minutes. There will be no intermission.

PERFORMANCE NOTES Adult subject matter that includes coarse language; references to female anatomy, sex acts, and a sex toy; and one explicit sex scene.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES



HALLEY FEIFFER (Playwright / "Karla")

Halley Feiffer is a writer and actor. Plays include *I'm Gonna Pray For You So Hard* (Atlantic Theater Company, Outer Critics Circle Nomination), *Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow* (Williamstown Theatre Festival), *How To Make Friends and Then Kill Them* (Rattlestick Playwrights Theater) and this play, originally produced at MCC Theater. Her plays have been produced around the country and in the U.K., and have been developed by Second Stage Theater, New York Theatre Workshop and the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. She has been commissioned by Playwrights Horizons, Atlantic Theater Company, Williamstown Theatre Festival and three times by Manhattan Theatre Club. Television writing credits include *The One Percent* (Starz), *Purity* (Showtime), *Mozart in the Jungle* (Amazon) and original pilots for FX and TNT. Acting credits include the Broadway revivals of *The Front Page* and *The House of Blue Leaves* (Theater World Award), as well as numerous Off-Broadway productions including *Tigers Be Still* (Roundabout Theatre Company, Drama League Nomination). Television and film work includes recurring roles on HBO's *Mildred Pierce* and *Bored to Death* and the films *The Squid and the Whale*, *Margot at the Wedding*, *Gentlemen Broncos* and *He's Way More Famous than You*, which she co-wrote. She is a graduate of Wesleyan University and teaches playwriting at NYU.



TRIP CULLMAN (Director)

Broadway: *Six Degrees of Separation*, *Significant Other*. Select Off-Broadway: *Punk Rock* (Obie Award), *Yen*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gynecologic Oncology Unit at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center of New York City* (MCC Theater); *The Layover*, *Lonely I'm Not*, *The Substance of Fire*, *Bachelorette*, *Swimming In The Shallows*, *Some Men* (Second Stage Theater); *A Small Fire* (Drama Desk nomination), *Assistance*, *The Drunken City* (Playwrights Horizons); *I'm Gonna Pray For You So Hard* (Atlantic Theater Company); *Significant Other* (Roundabout Theatre Company); *Choir Boy* (Manhattan Theatre Club); *Murder Ballad* (Manhattan Theatre Club and Union Square Theater); *Roulette* (Ensemble Studio Theatre); *The Hallway Trilogy: Nursing* (Rattlestick Playwrights Theater); *Dog Sees God* (Century Center); *The Last Sunday In June* (Rattlestick Playwrights Theater and Century Center); *US Drag* (stageFARM); and several productions with The Play Company. London: *The Colby Sisters of Pittsburgh*, *Pennsylvania* (Tricycle Theatre). Select regional: Geffen Playhouse (Ovation nominations), Alliance Theatre (NAACP and Suzi Bass awards), The Old Globe, South Coast Repertory, La Jolla Playhouse, Bay Street Theater, Williamstown Theatre Festival. Upcoming: *Lobby Hero* (Broadway), *This Ain't No Disco* (Atlantic Theater Company).

SECTION 2

THEMES & TOPICS

MAKING FUN OF THE WORST

BLUE (adjective)
profane, indecent
(merriam-webster.com)

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/HumorSalve

tinyurl.com/BrittanicaBlkHumor

BrittanicaBlkHumor

tinyurl.com/WikiRibald

[tinyurl.com/](http://tinyurl.com/NewRepubWomenComedy)

NewRepubWomenComedy



Cancer is no joke, yet in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gynecologic Unit of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center of New York City*, playwright Halley Feiffer weaves together provocative strands of humor as she evokes two characters coping with their mothers' afflictions as well as losses and failures in their lives.

DARK OR BLACK HUMOR

Learning that a loved one is gravely ill usually rocks those close to them to their core, and most try to remain optimistic or stoic in their presence. Those who have cared for hospitalized family members can often be a source of support for others in the same position. By having Karla and Don rage at each other in front of their ill and sleeping mothers, Feiffer starts her play off in “black comedy” mode, which “juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones that underscore the senselessness or futility of life.” Underneath the dark humor lie deeper questions. Feiffer seems to be asking on behalf of her characters: How can we be noble in the face of loss when we are wild with anger, sadness and helplessness?

BLUE HUMOR

Feiffer places Karla as a stand-up comic in the company of current female comedians, such as Margaret Cho, Amy Schumer and Sarah Silverman, who speak about their bodies and sexuality with an in-your-face confidence.

Female comics have long struggled to match the success of their male counterparts, and up until recently most did so without venturing into “blue” territory. Instead, they took on domesticity and indulged in self-hate. Groundbreaking comedian Phyllis Diller downplayed her looks and made fun of her lack of wifely skills in order to be taken seriously. Joan Rivers succeeded initially by being self-deprecating about her appearance and marriage prospects. Roseanne Barr was one of the first female comedians to comment ironically about home life, which thrilled the women in her audiences who identified with how little she cared about serving as a “domestic goddess.”

SNARK (noun, informal)
an attitude or expression
of mocking irreverence and
sarcasm
(merriam-webster.com)

Thanks to their legacies, today's leading comics who happen to be women, such as Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, are smartly self-mocking and sharply observant about life and work and the world at large. While it could be argued that female comedians are now using "blue" material to succeed by shocking audiences the way male comics have for decades, their comedy acts can also be viewed as assertions of power over how they are perceived and treated, physically, sexually and emotionally, in life and in the comedy world.

INSULT HUMOR

Feiffer is a master of snark:

KARLA

-- so in your terribly insecure / imagination --

DON

Are / you always like this? Do you have friends?

She also has a heart. After a series of cruel exchanges, Karla and Don end up finding refuge in each other. When Marcie finally wakes up halfway through the play, she makes hurtful digs at Karla, but her daughter takes care of her without retaliating. By the play's end, we understand that nasty quips have covered up each character's fragility, likely created by deep disappointments prior to the onset of cancer and made worse by the threat of new losses.

GALLOWS HUMOR

Feiffer's entire play can be seen as one giant act of "gallows humor" — which "makes fun of a life-threatening, disastrous, or terrifying situation." By creating a comedy that trashes hospital room decorum and concerns about mortality, Feiffer continues the tradition, which reaches back to Aristophanes in ancient Greece and includes Western authors such as Jonathan Swift and Kurt Vonnegut, of coming up with a joke or sardonic observation in response to a dire situation. While distasteful or inappropriate to some, for others, being humorous in response to disaster or death is a way for them to shake their fists at misfortune, rise above crushing circumstances, outwit those who seek to oppress or extinguish them, and enjoy release from inescapably hard circumstances. By putting their reactions to tragic circumstances into comic form, playwrights such as Feiffer ultimately allow audiences to enjoy a respite from, if not defy, fearsome life experiences.

DISCUSSION POINT

What kind of humor makes you laugh spontaneously and deeply?
What kind makes you uncomfortable or do you find offensive? Why?

MANAGING CANCER



MEMORIAL SLOAN KETTERING CANCER CENTER (MSKCC)

For 25 years, MSKCC has been ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as one of the top two cancer treatment hospitals in the country. Its doctors have enormous expertise and its renowned research arm has advanced knowledge of the biology of cancer as well its treatment. (mskcc.org)

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/NatInstituteCancer
tinyurl.com/CDCGyneCancer

PHOTO CREDITS

Public Domain via Wikileaks

Most cancers result from cells that multiply uncontrollably and create tumors that take over the tissue of healthy organs in our bodies. This process can be triggered by genetic defects we inherit or those caused by exposure to environmental toxins such as chemicals in drinking water and food, air pollution and cigarette smoke.

Decades ago a cancer diagnosis was often considered a death sentence, since treatment was a general assault that often failed to arrest the disease and could also be as devastating to the body as the disease itself. Over time, medical research at institutions such as Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York City and City of Hope near Los Angeles has identified different types of cancers, how they are supplied with nutrients and their level of aggressiveness, which has led to customized treatment. Some cancers, if caught early enough through tests such as mammograms, scans and colonoscopies and removed without having spread, can be cured. If cancer has metastasized and is not too far along, it can be beaten back through a combination of surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and medication, and managed as a chronic disease for years, if not decades. Some cancers are so aggressive and spread so quickly to other organs they defy treatment.

Gynecologic oncology treats cancers of the female reproductive system. In Feiffer's play, Karla's mother has just had surgery to remove her uterus, because its lining was found to be cancerous. Karla notes to Don with some relief that the cancer is "Stage 1," which means the it has not invaded too deeply. Marcie's endometrial cancer is considered treatable. Don's mother, Geena, who is described in the play's stage directions as "Brave. Tired." has been "battling ovarian cancer for seven years," which likely means she has had several surgeries and many rounds of debilitating chemotherapy. Cancer of the ovaries is challenging because by the time symptoms are present it tends to have become more difficult to treat.

No matter what the physical struggles, navigating all the unknowns that go along with the disease is also challenging. Through treatment, cancer can go into remission, only to reappear at the original site, or spread or transform into another kind of cancer somewhere else in the body. It can come and go then come back again — unpredictably.

There is much in life over which we have no control. Being able to focus on and savor life one day at a time is a powerful way to manage the inevitable fears and concerns of facing a serious illness. When Karla and Marcie begin to resolve their differences at the end of the play, Feiffer also shows that comfort, if not joy, can come from reaching out and loving each other through uncertainty.

OPPOSITES CLASH

SOURCE

tinyurl.com/
PsychTodayOppAttract

All compelling stories depend on conflict to set them in motion and create enough tension to sustain an audience's interest. In comedies, writers often place characters with wildly different personalities in close proximity — in a living space, on a road trip, handcuffed together — to mine the humor as each drives the other crazy.

Comic opposites are a staple of traditional romantic comedies. They usually dislike each other initially, and then fight feeling attracted, before giving into love. In Feiffer's play, Karla is in her twenties and stylish, while forty-something Don wears a jacket with holes at the elbows. He loves the cerebral humor of the *New Yorker* magazine, and she's into brash stand-up comedy. She speaks without a filter and hides behind her withering comments, where he is more considerate and visibly deeply feeling. When Karla finds out Don is wealthy, she gives him a hard time for being a penny-pincher since she is a struggling artist.

DON I get you coffee all the time!

KARLA Yeah but you always make me pay you back.

DON Well, it --

KARLA And you always text me the exact amount that I owe you. Like, while you're buying it.

DON Well, it's --

KARLA You're always like, "Hi Karla. Your almond milk latte was \$5.23. Exact change would be preferable, please."

DON Well it is very overpriced, here!

In real life, opposites are said to attract. Joining up with someone not like us can be fascinating and enlarging and create tension that keeps us interested. Eventually, the newness wears off. Unlike characters in romantic comedies, whose disapproval of each other vanishes the minute they declare their love, opposites in real life can end up mired in fighting for the supremacy of their opinions and tastes. But being too similar may not be the best route to harmony, either. According to clinical psychologist Vinita Mehta in *Psychology Today*, "the happiest couples never have the same character — they just have the best *understanding of their differences*."

DISCUSSION POINT

Have you ever been close to someone who is completely different from you? Did the relationship thrive or die? Why?

THE POWER OF PLACE



PHOTO CREDITS

PD/Pixabay

The “world” of a play is established by its *setting* — the time and place in which the story occurs. The more vivid the setting, the more it can inform the values, perceptions, actions and interactions of the characters. A play’s locales and era also provide reference points for audience members who may be acquainted with them, and can teach playgoers about unfamiliar places and times.

In most plays, there are several places that comprise the world in which the story is set: an urban, suburban, rural, or imaginary locale that exists outside the smaller spaces in which the characters engage with each other, which can have distinctive cultural elements, such as ways of speaking and social traditions. In Feiffer’s play, New York City is the larger world in which the hospital room at Memorial Sloan Kettering exists. This city is notorious for its fast pace and intense energy, especially on the island of Manhattan, where enormous numbers of residents, workers and tourists are funneled along streets, into subways and tall buildings, which have nowhere to go but up, then out again as everyone returns home. The pace and intensity often show up in how people move and speak, as evidenced by Karla and Don’s rapid, overlapping exchanges.

All of the action of Feiffer’s play occurs in a hospital room in a cancer treatment center, which casts a somber tone on what unfolds, especially at the beginning of the play. As Feiffer states in her stage directions, “The decor makes every effort to be cheery...Still, it is a hospital room, and the thick plastic blinds that hang in the windows and obscure the lovely late- afternoon sunlight -- coupled with the occasional beeping emitted intermittently from the IV stands -- remind us that this is a place where cheeriness is, for the most part, put on hold.”

A shared hospital room also puts pressure on visitors to uphold certain norms, such as being respectful and quiet around those who are very ill, which is what makes Karla’s stand-up routine, her conflicts with Don, and, later, their explicit sexual encounter in an adjoining bathroom, shocking — and funny. If Karla and Don’s antagonistic opening scene took place in a train station, such as New York’s busy Grand Central Station, with mothers dozing on benches nearby, their behavior might attract some curious glances, but would not be out of bounds to the same degree.

DISCUSSION POINT

What place has had a powerful impact on how you view and engage with life? Might it provide a vivid setting for a play? Why or why not?

MONOLOGUE: A LETTER TO OUR YOUNGER SELVES

An encounter with a serious illness — either our own or that of a loved one — can suddenly cast life in a different light. Little things that used to concern us seem unimportant, and living with passion and purpose can become paramount.

Recall who you were 10-20 years ago. Were you a child, young adult or adult? Where were you and with whom were you living — if anyone? What occupied your time? What were your main aims and concerns in life?

Write a monologue in the form of a letter to your younger self, sharing what you know to be important in life **now**. Feel free to refer to roads not taken and/or to affirm the choices you have made since that time. Write with honesty and compassion, and avoid judgment.

If you feel comfortable, read or memorize and recite your monologue to a trusted friend. Ask them how they were inspired to reflect on what is important in their lives by listening to your monologue.

DISCUSSION POINT | Which insights can you act on in the present day?

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH CLAY DZYGUN

What is your title, and how long have you been employed at the Geffen Playhouse?

I am the Office Coordinator and have been at the Geffen for about four and a half years.

What are your primary responsibilities in your current position?

I assist Executive Director Gil Cates Jr. in whatever he needs, which includes coordinating with agents and other parties in order to organize and make sure contracts get signed for all of the season productions; scheduling and managing meetings for him and keeping his calendar; and being available to help coordinate projects outside of the regular season productions, such as Spotlight shows or the filming of our staged productions.

What other positions have you held at the Geffen, and what were your responsibilities in those roles?

I was first hired, part-time, in the box office, where I fielded calls and assisted subscribers and patrons with ticketing needs. I then transitioned to Development, where I helped with processing donations that came into the theater, fielded calls for our donors and helped with their ticketing needs. I also worked with the rest of the development team to plan and execute different donor events such as Opening Nights and *Backstage at the Geffen*.

Has assuming various roles at the theater supported your work as the assistant to the Executive Director? If so, how?

Absolutely! The Executive Director is involved in all aspects of the theater's operations, so knowing what it is like to work in different roles and departments allows me to have a greater understanding of situations and tasks as they arise.

What educational and/or artistic pathways led to working at the Geffen?

I studied acting in college and moved out to Los Angeles to work as an actor. I had been living in LA for about 7 years before I started working at the Geffen.



How has your experience as an actor informed your work at the Geffen?

Being able to connect with and speak about the art on our stages is very important, when assisting the Executive Director, and proved true when I worked in Development. I continue to have a lot of contact with our Board of Directors, as well as donors and sponsors, and being able to talk about our productions with knowledge and passion helps keep them informed in meaningful ways.

What do you find most challenging about your work?

I have to be on my toes a lot! Since the Executive Director is involved in many different aspects of the company, I have to be able to switch gears quickly from one thing to the next. Organization is key to avoid letting things fall through the cracks, so I am constantly looking for ways to keep everything on track in timely and effective ways.

What do you find most satisfying about your work?

Many things! I absolutely love theater, and being able to call one my home is quite incredible. I also love working with the people here at the Geffen. Staff members, in all departments, are supremely talented at what they do, and it is a pleasure to learn and grow with each and every person. ■

SECTION 4

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

Going to the theater is a unique experience, and we all need to be mindful of “audience etiquette,” or how to behave at the theater.

The Audience’s Role: The audience plays an essential role at the performance of a play. Without an audience, the actors are only rehearsing. Audience members’ concentrated silence and responses, such as laughing and applauding, provide energy to the actors as they bring the performance to life.

Behaviors to Avoid: Since the actors can hear the audience so clearly, it is important not to engage in behaviors that might disturb or distract them — and fellow audience members.

These actions include:

- Talking
- Texting
- Allowing cell phones to ring
- Taking photographs or video
- Getting up to leave before intermission or the end of the show (unless it is a true emergency)
- Eating or drinking
- Unwrapping candy or cough drops.

Use of Social Media: We appreciate you sharing your Geffen Playhouse experience via social media, but ask that you **do not do so inside the theater, where the use of electronic devices is prohibited.**

We recommend that you post your status **in the lobby after the performance**, and invite you to tag @GeffenPlayhouse and use #GeffenPlayhouse to share your experience and continue the conversation with us online.

Audience Awareness Activity: Before going to the Geffen Playhouse for the first time, compare and contrast the experience of seeing a live play with:

- going to the movies
- attending a live sporting event
- watching television.

DISCUSSION POINT

If you were onstage performing a play, how would you want the audience to behave?

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and your group members' interests, guide them to respond to questions selected from those 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. Ask for several volunteers to share their groups' answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gynecologic Oncology Unit of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City*? Entertained? Offended? Engaged? Bored? Conflicted? Inspired? What made you feel this way?
- What amused you the most about the play? The least? Why?
- To which character or characters did you relate the most? Why?
- If you have cared for a loved one dealing with cancer in the hospital, what did playwright Halley Feiffer get right about the experience? What did she miss?
- What do you think happened to Karla and Don? Did they end up together, or just see each other through some harrowing moments in their lives, before moving on? In either case, why?
- How do you think Karla's mother Marcie and her relationship with her daughter fared, after the conclusion of the play?
- What surprised you about your reaction to the play?
- What did you appreciate most about the performances by the actors?
- How did the set, lighting and costumes contribute to the comedy and poignancy of the story?
- Would you recommend the Geffen's production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gynecologic Oncology Unit of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City* to other theatergoers? Why, or why not?

SECTION 5

RESOURCES

LEARN how humor can help us weather life in “Humor as a Weapon, Shield and Salve” at tinyurl.com/HumorSalve.

GO TAKE stand-up comedy classes at the Rodney Dangerfield Institute at Los Angeles City College. Information at tinyurl.com/RodDangerStandUpLACC.

LEARN about the causes and prevention of cancer at the National Cancer Institute website tinyurl.com/NatInstituteCancerPrevent.

WATCH classic romantic comedies in which the lead characters clash and find love, such as *Annie Hall* starring Woody Allen and Diane Keaton and *When Harry Met Sally* starring Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan. (Available at the Los Angeles Public Library)

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K Period Media
Keyes Automotive Group
KIND Bars
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Paradigm Talent Agency
Paramount Pictures
Ralph M. Parsons Foundation
Participant Media
Rosenthal Family Foundation
Thomas Safran & Associates
The Sheri & Les Biller Family Foundation
Shay Family Foundation
Simms/Mann Family Foundation
Simon-Strauss Foundation
Singer Family Foundation
Smith Family Foundation
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Transamerica Foundation
Twentieth Century Fox
UCLA
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And many more!



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