



THE NICETIES

STUDY GUIDE

GEFFEN
PLAYHOUSE

THE NICETIES

WEST COAST PREMIERE
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE
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SPECIAL THANKS TO

**Amy Levinson, Rachel Weigardt-Egel, Brian Dunning, Wendell Pascual,
Joannarae Ibañez, Brian Allman, Ellen Catania and Jessica Brusilow Rollins.**

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



WRITTEN BY

Eleanor Burgess

DIRECTED BY

Kimberly Senior

SCENIC DESIGNER

Cameron Anderson

COSTUME DESIGNER

Kara Harmon

LIGHTING DESIGNER

D.M. Wood

ORIGINAL MUSIC & SOUND DESIGN BY

Elisheba Ittoop

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER

Ross Jackson

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

Leia Crawford

CASTING DIRECTOR

Alaine Alldaffer, CSA



Lisa Banes

as Janine Bosko



Jordan Boatman

as Zoe Reed

SYNOPSIS

Zoe Reed, a 20-year-old African American college student, is meeting with Janine Bosko, a white history professor of Polish descent in her early 60s, to discuss Zoe's paper on the American Revolution. When Zoe raises a compelling point about the unaddressed role of slavery at that time, she is frustrated by Janine's limited view of history, her lack of awareness and concern about racial inequities, and her condescension as a teacher. Janine, in turn, is put off by Zoe's attachment to feelings over facts and her choice to engage in activism instead of the rigorous research that Janine believes would ensure Zoe's success in school and a career. Fueled by their inability to hear each other, their argument escalates into hostilities that have unexpected consequences for both of them.

TIME: Act I: Late March, 2016.
Act II: Three weeks later.

RUNNING TIME: Approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes. *There will be one 15 minute intermission.*

PERFORMANCE NOTE: There is profanity.

ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES



ELEANOR BURGESS (Playwright)

Eleanor Burgess's work has been produced at Manhattan Theatre Club, McCarter Theatre Center, Huntington Theatre Company, Alliance Theatre, Merrimack Repertory Theatre, the Contemporary American Theater Festival, Portland Stage Company and Centenary Stage, and developed with The New Group, New York Theatre Workshop, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Salt Lake Acting Company, the Lark Play Development Center and the Kennedy Center/NNPN MFA Playwrights Workshop. She's been a member of Page 73's writers' group Interstate 73 and The Civilians' R&D Group, and has been the recipient of the Alliance/Keneda National Graduate Playwriting Award, an EST/Sloan commission, a Huntington Playwriting Fellowship, a Keen Teens Commission and the Susan Glaspell Award for Women Playwrights. She grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts, studied history at Yale College and recently completed the M.F.A. in Dramatic Writing at NYU/Tisch.



KIMBERLY SENIOR (Director)

Kimberly Senior returns to the Geffen where she previously directed *Sex with Strangers*. She also directed the Broadway premiere of Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Disgraced*, which she previously directed Off-Broadway at Lincoln Center Theater (LCT3), Goodman Theatre, Seattle Repertory Theatre, Berkeley Rep and Mark Taper Forum. Off-Broadway: *The Niceties* (Manhattan Theatre Club), *Career Suicide* (produced by Judd Apatow), *Sakina's Restaurant* (Audible), *Discord* (Primary Stages), *Engagements* (Second Stage Theater), *The Who and the What* (LCT3). *Regional: Photograph 51* (South Coast Repertory); *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley* (Milwaukee Repertory Theater); *The Niceties* (Huntington Theatre Company, McCarter Theater Center); *Disgraced*, *Rapture*, *Blister*, *Burn* and *Support Group for Men* (Goodman Theatre); *Buried Child*, *The Scene*, *Marjorie Prime*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Letters* (Writers Theatre); *Sheltered* (Alliance Theatre); *Want and The North Plan* (Steppenwolf Theatre Company); *Other Than Honorable* (Geva Theatre Center); among others. Television: *Chris Gethard: Career Suicide* (HBO). Senior is the recipient of the 2016 Special Non-Equity Jeff Award, 2016 Alan Schneider Award (TCG) and 2018 Einhorn Award (Primary Stages).

SECTION 2

THEMES & TOPICS

WHOSE HISTORY?

HISTORY (noun)

a branch of knowledge that records and explains past events (merriam.webster.com)

FOUNDING FATHERS

the most prominent statesmen of America's Revolutionary generation, responsible for the successful war for colonial independence from Great Britain, the liberal ideas celebrated in the Declaration of Independence, and the republican form of government defined in the United States Constitution (brittanica.com)

REVOLUTION (noun)

the overthrow or renunciation of one government or ruler and the substitution of another by the governed (merriam.webster.com)

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/AmerRevTimeline
tinyurl.com/SPLCTeachSlavery

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States: 1492-2001*. New York, New York: Harper Collins, 2003

When thinking of the American Revolution (1775-1783), many U.S. citizens envision white colonists seeking freedom from the British monarchy, Thomas Jefferson crafting the Declaration of Independence, the signing of the Constitution by the Founding Fathers and George Washington winning the Revolutionary War and then leading the new nation as its first president. The complete picture of this era is more complex. Often left out are the people other than the wealthy men of European descent who led the formation of the new republic, including the millions of Native Americans who were pushed off their lands by colonists, the enslaved laborers forcibly transported from Africa that became 20% of the population by the 1770s, poor whites who were not property owners, and women, who were considered inferior to men.

In *The Niceties*, differing views on whose interests were served by the revolution become the first flash points between the professor and student. Janine reveres the Founding Fathers and the concept of democracy, a portrait of George Washington is prominently displayed in her office, and she speaks of her desire to have “been in the room” when the U.S. Constitution was being drawn up. Janine references her Polish ancestry when describing her deep appreciation for the democratic ideals espoused in it, assuming, perhaps, that Zoe will empathize with how Poland suffered for decades under Soviet rule, in which citizens were subject to arrest if they opposed the government, there was no freedom of the press, and material goods were scarce.

When Zoe declines to join Janine in idealizing the Founding Fathers, she gives voice to those whose forced servitude made the establishment and expansion of the United States possible. She points out that she would have been a slave during the time of Continental Congress and that George Washington, along with many other Founding Fathers, owned slaves. Democracy's promises of the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness have often applied only to white middle and upper classes and not to people of color or poor whites.

The sharp exchange between Zoe and Janine about early American history shows the importance of representing multiple points of view in how history is reported and of considering the views of those who collect, analyze, and teach historical information. Since each person's “lens” is formed by their race, ethnicity, class, culture, upbringing, gender identity, sexual orientation, biases and capacity to think critically, we are also invited to examine — and expand — how we perceive the past and current events that impact our society.

DISCUSSION POINT

Think of a major historical event and what you know about it. Whose point of view has been included — and left out?

THE WORLD OF ACADEMIA

ACADEMIA (mass noun)

The environment or community concerned with the pursuit of research, education, and scholarship

MICROAGGRESSION (noun)

a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority) (merriam.webtser.com)

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/WikiHigherEd
tinyurl.com/BostonGlobeBurgessInterview

“Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students”
 Solorzano, D. Ceja, M., Yosso, T. (The Journal of Negro Education, 2000)

PHOTO CREDIT

Pixabay/PD



In an interview by Christopher Wallenberg in the Boston Globe, playwright Eleanor Burgess — a former high school history teacher — discloses that she based *The Niceties* on an incident that occurred at Yale University when she was an undergraduate there. What started as a request not to wear insensitive Halloween costumes, “exploded into a wider discussion about how students of color felt that Yale could sometimes be a hostile place for them.”

The university in which the play is set, like Yale, is an example of the institutions of higher learning based in New England that started as schools for aspiring religious ministers in the early 1700s and evolved into the liberal arts colleges of today, where students gain knowledge in the humanities and sciences and learn thinking and communication skills they can apply in professional careers as lawyers, doctors, businesspersons, and educators.

Zoe is a junior who has always been an excellent student, but since she is committed to righting societal wrongs, she is not sure continuing at the university is the right path for her. She feels surrounded by students who simply want the status of having gone to a top university. In *Janine*, Zoe has a teacher who cares about her success — on Janine’s terms — and who seems to be oblivious to her experience and interests as a student of color.

In their study on campus racial climate, university professors Daniel Solórzano, Manuel Ceja and Tara Yosso describe how students of color can feel both invisible and negatively regarded at universities, and subtle insults based on racial stereotypes known as microaggressions are often directed at them. For Zoe, tensions rise as Janine makes off-hand remarks and “jokes” she finds disturbing. As she grows more assertive, she tells Janine it is time to “decolonize the curriculum.” Solórzano and his colleagues suggest that “a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color” help make campus climates more positive. Janine initially brushes off this demand, until her job is threatened and she appears to affirm the richness of including under-represented voices in her curriculum. In this way, Zoe discovers the power of moving through discomfort into the kind of insistence that may bring about change.

INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICTS

DIGITAL NATIVE (noun)

a person that grows up in the digital age, rather than acquiring familiarity with digital systems as an adult, as a digital immigrant (wikipedia)

The terms digital native and digital immigrant were popularized by education consultant Marc Prensky as he explored how the current education system has not evolved for the students of today and therefore failing to serve their needs. Digital natives are considered “native speakers” of the digital world and language. Prensky claimed that digital immigrant instructors are speaking in an outdated language (pre-digital age) and having a difficult time educating a whole population speaking a new language. The terms encourage a larger conversation on ways to understand how modern students learn and how to update methodology to teach content more effectively in today’s highly digital world.

FEMINISM (noun)

Organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests (merriam.webster.com)

SOURCES

DeBard, Robert. “Millennials Coming to College,” Special Issue: Serving the Millennial Generation. Volume 2004
tinyurl.com/Pew-Millennials-2010
tinyurl.com/Digital-Native-Prensky
tinyurl.com/4WavesFeminism
tinyurl.com/USAToday-Intersectionality

PHOTO CREDIT

T. Charles Erickson



Experiences and Characteristics of Baby Boomers and Millennials: Those born between 1946-1964 in the United States, known as Baby Boomers, grew up in a period of post-World War II prosperity. Many rebelled as young people against the conservatism of the previous generation by protesting against the Vietnam War and racism and sexism, and by embracing more permissive lifestyles. As they have aged, they have been accused of refusing to mature as they seek ways to fend off older age and remain in the workforce longer than expected.

Born between 1981 and 1996, Millennials have been stereotyped as entitled and fragile, because of their demands on parents, schools, jobs, and society for support and safety, but they are more accurately described in a Pew Research report as “confident, connected, and open to change.” Even though they face having less financial security than their parents, they are upbeat about their futures; their facility with technology and embrace of social media have inspired a more “global” consciousness and developed their capacity to learn from a variety of Internet sources. They are more interested in life/work balance than Baby Boomers, whom they see as “workaholics” where Baby Boomers see themselves as dedicated to achieving professional success. Millennials seek flexibility about where and when they work, and many are progressive advocates for the rights of people of color, women, the poor, and the LGBTQ community.

Conflicts in *The Nices*: Several of Zoe and Janine’s clashes are based on different attitudes towards the balance of school and service, valid scholarly resources, and feminism, much of which can be traced to their generational values.

School & Service: Most of the work of universities is focused on evidence-based scholarship, in which ideas are proven by facts found in research. When Janine and Zoe first meet, Janine dismisses Zoe’s thesis about slavery and the American Revolution and then judges it “original” but lacking in evidence. Janine encourages Zoe to take the time to do the research to support her point of view. When Zoe cites her activism as why she won’t have the time for extra work, Janine disapproves of Zoe valuing her “extracurricular” activities over her coursework. Because of her own priorities when she was a student and high expectations as a teacher, what Janine likely does not fathom is how, according to Robert DeBard, “The pragmatic approach Millennial students tend to take toward curricular requirements and

extracurricular opportunities on their campus can be related to their ambition.” He further states, “compared to students just five or six years ago, today’s freshmen are more academically optimistic, service-oriented, and politically engaged (“Millennials Coming to College,” 2004).” In fact, Zoe’s activism is directly tied to her “ambition” to serve as a community organizer when she graduates from college.

Valid Scholarly Resources: After Zoe cites an Internet resource for her thesis that Janine considers incorrect and, therefore, unreliable, Janine urges her to focus on facts: “You make huge claims about what might have motivated people. You cite — psychologists. Bloggers. But you offer no primary documents. No perspectives from people who were there about what they saw going on. You need to hit the library.”

There is a gap between a teacher like Janine, who has depended on the tradition of citing primary sources in printed books, and a student like Zoe, who has grown up with technology’s access to multiple resources. Janine’s insistence that Zoe use correct information is valid, but she does not adequately address how the library is full of books written by scholars with limited scopes. With strong criteria for vetting resources, perhaps those who live comfortably within the digital world will, ultimately, be able to explore and support a wider range of opinions and resources.

Feminism: According to Howard Zinn in his *People’s History of the United States*, as of the 1800s, a woman “could not vote, could not own property; when she did work, her wages were one-fourth to one-half what men earned in the same job. Women were excluded from the professions of law and medicine, from colleges, from the ministry.” Their place was in the home.

Out of liberal politics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries arose the “**First Wave**” of feminism, which challenged the “domesticity” of women by demanding more work options and the right to vote. It also connected with the abolition movements of the times.

The “**Second Wave**,” spanning 1960s to the 1990s, emerged from the anti-war and Civil Rights movement. More radical in spirit, it analyzed the subjugation of women through the lenses of “patriarchy, capitalism, and normative heterosexuality.” Advocates of the “**Third Wave**” (mid-1990s to 2000s), rejected the notion that feminine beauty was connected to being “objectified” by men, and became more multiculturally and class oriented. To move discourse out of the academic sphere, proponents of the “**Fourth Wave**” (2008 to the present) have decided to bring issues such as sexual abuse, violence against women and all forms of oppression to the public’s attention in local and global media.

The Fourth Wave has recognized the importance of “intersectional feminism,” which as journalist Alia E. Dastagir notes, “is the understanding of how women’s overlapping identities — including race, class, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation — impact the way they experience oppression and discrimination (USA Today, 2017).” Janine’s form of feminism is anchored in the Second Wave, which was led primarily by middle-class white women. While her fervor for the empowerment of women, including Zoe, is no doubt genuine, in trying to equate her struggle as a feminist with Zoe’s as a woman of color, she is unable to recognize the critical and different dimensions of Zoe’s experience as a black woman in America.

DISCUSSION POINT

What disagreements have you experienced with a younger or older person that may be the result of growing up in different eras?

WHEN WE DON'T LISTEN

SOURCES

tinyurl.com/
BostonGlobeBurgessInterview
tinyurl.com/Resolve-Conflict-
Skills

PHOTO CREDIT

Pixabay/PD



Ineffective Communication: In the incident at Yale on which playwright Burgess based *The Niceties*, she was surprised by how “smart, educated, and well-meaning Americans couldn’t talk to each other about race.” In the play, she has captured both the divide that exists between the characters, as issues of race surface but are not addressed in ways that advance understanding, and their inability to communicate effectively — they often talk over, through, and down to each other.

JANINE: You know women fought to go here? We petitioned, we held a sit-in. We knew this place was valuable, and we fought to be a part of it, and here you are taking it for granted.

ZOE: Only it’s not valuable, because you don’t understand my work.

JANINE: I understand your work perfectly, it’s just flawed work and it doesn’t deserve an A and it won’t get one.

Beat.

ZOE: What grade do you think you deserve?

JANINE: Excuse me?

ZOE: Well it’s a little bizarre, isn’t it? You do something for me, I do something for you, but you get to tell me when my work isn’t good enough and I don’t get to tell you when your work isn’t good enough?

Active Listening: To learn and grow from conflict it helps to listen deeply and seek to understand the other person’s point of view, no matter how upsetting it is to hear what they are saying. Pausing before responding, asking questions to elicit more thoughts or information, and checking for understanding by paraphrasing or summarizing, signals the intention to absorb and respect what has been shared.

To practice, read the scene again and imagine how you might apply active listening skills to each character’s statements.

DISCUSSION
POINT

Am I a good listener? How might I improve? What might the benefits of active listening be in my home life and workplace?

THE ART OF ARGUING

Drama is based on conflict. As characters go after what they want and their needs collide and tensions rise, the audience gets pulled into seeing how the conflict will play out and be resolved — or not.

Imagine two characters who know each other and who are only interested in advancing their own interests. During a moment in a heated argument, they accuse instead of listen. Be specific and detailed in how you craft their dialogue, in the script format below.

_____ Character Name #1	_____ Character Name #2
Describe the conflict: _____	

Character Name #1

I wish you _____

Character Name #2

But _____

Character Name #1

You always _____

Character Name #2

No, I don't! You _____

Read the scene aloud with a partner several times — with intention and intensity.

SECTION 3

PERSONNEL PROFILE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOANNARAE IBAÑEZ

What is your title and how long have you worked at the Geffen?

I am Manager of School & Community Programs and have been with the Geffen since September 2018.

What are your primary responsibilities?

In collaboration with the Education team, I support our school and community programs by ensuring that we have the systems, resources, partnerships, and information to successfully carry out our work.

What experiences as a theater artist, educator, and administrator led to your job in Education & Community Engagement at the Geffen?

I started doing theater my junior year of high school. Due to a lack of accessible theater programs in our community, my high school theater teacher (and mentor) founded the Children's Summer Theatre Program that I volunteered for every summer through college and was the Program Director of for 5 years. Inspired by our summer work, I developed after school theater and performance art programs that I implemented in several elementary schools all over Los Angeles, while finishing my BA in theater at Whittier College. Post graduation, I was asked to rebuild a high school theater department. After 5 years of teaching high school theater, I became Company Manager at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica, and worked part time as a teaching artist for Inside Out Community Arts. With 11 years of experience in theater education and production, I found myself at the Geffen helping to create and manage the programs we bring into classrooms and organizations across Los Angeles.

Was there a pivotal moment when you realized you wanted a life in the arts or did it occur incrementally?

Since I was a child, I have expressed myself through various forms of performance. But my eyes were opened to the power of theater arts during my sophomore year in high school, while sitting in the audience of my school's production of *A Piece of My Heart* in which my cousin was performing. I was completely mesmerized by my cousin's transformation on stage and felt myself tearing up for reasons that, at the time, I could not understand. From that moment on, I knew I wanted



to make the power of experiencing live theater accessible to all, everywhere I go.

What beliefs about arts education inform your work? More specifically, how does attending shows and learning about theater serve our students and community members?

All my work is driven by my belief that art should be honest, empowering and accessible, and that arts education should be multicultural, diverse and woven into the core foundation of schools and communities. When students and community members attend shows and engage in theater education they are taking part in an experience that can activate their emotions and arm them with knowledge and skills. Arts education can heal and grow individuals all while strengthening their capacities to create, read and write, listen and understand, lead, design and collaborate.

What do you find most challenging about your work?

Arts education constantly challenges me to truly see the world around me and to be aware of the many influences, shifts and challenges that affect our students and community members. I seek to ensure that our work represents the diverse group of participants we work with.

What do you find most satisfying?

Serving the students and community. All my work is in service to the people that participate in our programming and their experiences and empowerment through theater. ■

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 during 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 their 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 in 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 *The Niceties*? Engrossed? Distanced? Entertained? Bored? Conflicted? Moved? Inspired? What made you feel this way?
- At which points were you most engaged in the story? Why? At which points were you least engaged? Why? (Provide evidence from the production.)
- How did this production illuminate the role of slavery in early American history?
- Did this play affirm or challenge what your understanding of “history” is? If so, how? If not, why?
- How would you describe the “lens” through which each character perceives societal wrongs?
- Did the encounters between teacher and student remind you of your own? If so, how? If not, why?
- In the discussions about what it takes to succeed in higher education and in a career, which character’s point of view did you support most? Why?
- What were the characters’ “blind spots” as human beings? How did they affect their relationship?
- What did you appreciate most about the performances by the actors?
- How did the set, costumes, props, lighting, and sound contribute to the impact of the show?
- Would you recommend this production of *The Niceties* to other theatergoers? Why, or why not?

SECTION 5

RESOURCES

LISTEN to playwright Eleanor Burgess discuss her play *The Niceties*, when it was produced at the Huntington Theater in Boston at tinyurl.com/BurgessYouTube.

LEARN about American history from the points of view of underrepresented people in *A People's History of the United States: 1492-2001* by educator Howard Zinn.

LEARN about the experiences of African American students at colleges at tinyurl.com/CampusRacialClimate.

LEARN about the characteristics and attitudes of Millennials in a report by the Pew Research Center at tinyurl.com/Pew-Millennials-2010

WATCH a group of Millennials and Baby Boomers engage in dialogue about a range of issues at tinyurl.com/MillBabyBoomDialogue.

LEARN about “intersectional feminism” in an article in USA Today at tinyurl.com/USAToday-Intersectionality

EXPLORE how to gain skills in conflict resolution at tinyurl.com/Resolve-Conflict-Skills.

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Shay Family Foundation
The Sherwood Foundation
Simms/Mann Family Foundation
Singer Family Foundation
Smith Family Foundation
Sondheim Foundation
Sony Pictures Entertainment
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And many more!



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