

TARRAGON THEATRE

study guide for students and educators



**Starring
Clare Coulter**

**Directed by Urjo Kareda
Set & costumes designed by Ken Garnhum
Lighting designed by Bonnie Beacher
Stage Managers: Kathryn Davies and Nan Shepherd**

November 3 to December 12, 1999

GOOD BONES STUDY GUIDE

SETTING

This play has a number of settings indoor and outdoor settings. Many of the settings are reflective of the Canadian environment ie: a dock, the attic of an old house, or a Muskoka chair.

CHARACTERS AND SYNOPSIS

Good Bones is a different sort of a play in that there is neither plot nor specific characters. However each prose lyric is a story within itself, told by one of perhaps more characters. What is important in this play is the idea of presence: the presence on Margaret Atwood's writing and Clare Coulter's performance.

Good Bones could be seen as a sort of guide or miscellany to the way we live our lives. As Canadians we have inherited a complex natural landscape that we still have a strong connection to, despite increasing urbanization. *Good Bones* explores our varying pasts, presents, and futures and the changing ideals, goals and visions that accompany these times.

Our complex relationship with the Canadian landscape is seen in the first lyric. The narrator's earliest memories are not of people or words but of the landscape: "The first thing I can remember is a blue line. This was on the left, where the lake disappeared into the sky."

Earliest memories evolve into childhood memories when the narrator recalls the joys of making poison with her brother, using various natural substances found around (or in) them.

Interior landscapes are also important. In another lyric, the narrator gathers up memories of the past by sifting through items in her grandfather's attic: "The Boy's Own Annual, 1911 was in my grandfather's attic, along with a pump organ that contained bats, rafter-high piles of western paperbacks, and a dress form, my grandmother's body frozen in wire when it still had a waist."

In another lyric an elderly person compares the past with the present, talking about the landscape of the past: "In the old days before the war, things were different. You could walk out to the end of the dock any day around five and cast a couple of times and there would be your walleye, for supper or breakfast, hang it all night from a tree branch so the bears wouldn't get it."

Atwood also shows how landscape works with our emotions and sense of being in *Strawberries* and *Everlasting*.

In later sections, she also addresses issues that are of concern to us in today's society. For example our increasing obsession with political correctness is made clear in *There Was Once*. She gives her own spin on society's obsession with reincarnation in *My Life As a Bat*.

She brings attention to a woman's sense of her physical self: exploring self-image in *The Female Body* or a body's deterioration in the title piece *Good Bones*.

Equally important to the writing is the performance. Clare Coulter breathes new life into the work giving each piece a distinct voice, a character. She and Atwood fuse together, giving us a guide to life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do the set pieces (ie: the table, the dock, the Muskoka chair) contribute to the stories being told? Clare Coulter moves to different locations on the set to tell different stories. Why do you think she makes these choices?
2. How do the music and the sound interweave with the stories being told?
3. How does the lighting help to tell the stories?
4. Is there a unifying theme or thread running throughout? If so what is it?
5. There are certain stories where Clare Coulter plays more than one character. How does she achieve this?
6. Atwood prints these stories as prose, not poems. Why do you think she makes this choice?

QUESTIONS AND FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES FOR SPECIFIC SECTIONS

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

- (a) Think about the landscape that Atwood is describing here. Why do you think this memory is so significant to her? What could it represent?
- (b) How does Clare Coulter's performance give us such a rich picture of Atwood's landscape even though we cannot see it?
- (c) What do you think Atwood means when she says, "this smell is the point at which the landscape dissolves and becomes something else"? What do you think the "something else" is?
- (d) Think of your earliest memory of a place or physical landscape. Draw or paint a picture, write a poem or short prose piece about this place. What does it mean to you? Share these works with other members of your class. Create some short movement based pieces with the members of the class re-enacting this environment.

MAKING POISON

- (a) Atwood writes: "Making poison is almost as much fun as making a cake. People like to make poison. If you don't understand this you will never understand anything." Discuss this statement.
- (b) Think of some childhood recipes that you created. What went into them? What did you end up doing with them? Write a short piece about it and share it.

THE BOY'S OWN ANNUAL

Look for some artifacts from your family. What do you think these objects meant to the owner? Create a short piece or monologue with the family artifact at its centre. Do you have some items of your own that might become artifacts in the future? Discuss.

BEFORE THE WAR

Interview an older family member about what life was like when they were young. How was life different? Was it better then or is it better now? Then create a monologue or short story from the point of view of the person interviewed.

BOYFRIENDS

Many things seem appealing at first glance or when seen from a distance. Often however they appear different when examined more closely. Have you experienced this? Write a poem or short monologue discussing this.

FAINTING

What does Atwood use fainting to represent in this piece? What do you think causes the narrator to faint? Why do you think she wishes that she had a scar?

STRAWBERRIES

- (a) In this piece, Atwood recreates emotion through colour. How does she use colour to describe anger?
- (b) Discuss the line, "And at some point during that hour, though not for the whole hour. I forgot what things were called and saw instead what they are."

THE FEMALE BODY

- (a) The narrator refers to her body as "her topic". Why do you think she makes this choice?
- (b) Describe a day in the life of your own "topic".
- (c) This section deals in part with the objectification of the female body. Is the narrator opposed to this objectification?
- (d) Barbie has always been a source of controversy in this area and many people believe she sets an unrealistic target of beauty. Take Barbie to court on this charge. What could you say to defend her? What could you say to incriminate her? What conclusion does the narrator come to about Barbie?

MY LIFE AS A BAT

- (a) Discuss these lines: "If you ask a human being what makes his flesh creep more, a bat or a bomb, he will say the bat. It is difficult to experience loathing for something merely metal, however ominous. We save these sensations for those with skin and flesh: a skin, a flesh, unlike our own." Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

- (b) Why does the narrator think that being a bat would be the ideal reincarnation? If you were to be reincarnated as an animal, what would it be? Write a monologue or short piece from the point of view of this animal.

THERE WAS ONCE

In this section a simple tale is attacked with political correctness.

- (a) Choose your favorite fairy tale and alter it with politically correct terms.
- (b) Divide into partners. Have one person attempt to tell a familiar story with the other person interrupting with suggestions for change. At the end, discuss how the storyteller felt. Have the person interrupting retell the story. Which is the better version?

INSIDE THE TARRAGON THEATRE *for teachers and students*

Welcome to the Tarragon Theatre! We are thrilled to welcome all of you to *Good Bones*. In addition to viewing and studying the production itself, it is also important to be aware of the mandate and history of the Tarragon Theatre. This in turn will broaden your understanding of the production you will see today.

OUR SPACES AND FACILITIES

If you take a tour around the theatre, you will soon notice that The Tarragon Theatre is a different type of theatre than The Elgin Winter Garden or the Pantages Theatre. Instead of sitting in a huge auditorium, you will be sitting in smaller more intimate “black box” theatre spaces. The Mainspace is Tarragon’s original 205-seat auditorium; it is the site of 5 of Tarragon’s yearly productions. Today’s performance will be in the Extra Space. In 1983, we added the Extra Space; this is a 100-seat flexible auditorium designed for more intimate experimental shows. It is the site of 3 Tarragon Theatre productions this season as well as numerous other touring and small theater company shows. Both venues provide full access and facilities for the physically challenged. If you take a walk back-stage, you will see our scenery, properties and wardrobe shops, administrative and production offices, and the Tarragon Studio.

MANDATE

The Tarragon mandate is “To develop Canadian playwrights and produce their scripts; to shape a community of Canadian artists and actors to interpret these plays; and to build an audience to receive and accept this work”. The theatre is continually reaching out to new artists--playwrights, actors, directors, and designers. By adhering to our mandate, we are able to celebrate the talents and stories of many, many Canadian artists thus making Tarragon an important aspect of Canadian culture.

HISTORY

Housed in a former cribbage board factory, the Tarragon theatre was founded in 1970 by Bill Glassco, a former professor at the University of Toronto. The first production was a play called CREEPS by David Freeman. This first play was representative of Tarragon’s strong mandate to produce innovative, interesting new work by Canadian playwrights. This became a tradition, which has carried on up until the present. During Bill Glassco’s twelve seasons as artistic director, Tarragon earned critical and popular acclaim and became a pioneer in the production of new Canadian plays and artists.

In 1982, Urjo Kareda, a former drama critic of the Toronto Star and literary manager of The Stratford Festival became the new Artistic Director. Under Kareda, the Tarragon continues to focus on exciting new Canadian work, and has productions of innovative international work as well. A continuing feature – begun by Bill Glassco - has been the presentation, on occasion, of modern perspectives on classic plays (by Chekhov, Ibsen, Strindberg, Goethe).

TARRAGON'S PLAYWRIGHTS

The Tarragon continues to champion works of established Canadian playwrights such as John Murrell, Judith Thompson., Michel Tremblay as well as fostering a new wave of dynamic young Canadian playwrights such as Joan MacLeod, Jason Sherman, Janet Munsil, Diane Flacks, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Guillermo Verdecchia, Morris Panych, Beth Hurst, Ken Garnhum, M.J. Kang.

Many of these playwrights were originally members of one of the Tarragon/Chalmers Playwrights units. Established in 1982, the unit is renewed annually. The unit has six to seven writers who work on scripts or scripts in progress both collectively and individually with Urjo Kareda and Tarragon's Associate Artistic Director Andy McKim. The process is very intensive. The writers who have been in this unit include: Jason Sherman, Joan MacLeod, John Mighton, Beth Herst, Brad Fraser, Don Hannah and Atom Egoyan. The unit "shows its stuff" in a week of readings from their new plays held in December. This week may be of interest to senior level, OAC students who may be working on plays of their own. Please call Kristen Van Alphen or Jenny Macdonald at (416) 536-5018 x.229 for more information or if you plan to bring students to this event.

This spring we are again offering a Young Playwrights Unit for young writers aged 15 – 19.

TOURING AND VISITING ARTIST

Tarragon has mounted productions at the Edinburgh Festival, in London and Birmingham, the Mayfest in Glasgow, Edmonton, Expo '86 in Vancouver, the Young Canada Games in Charlottetown, the duMaurier World Stage Festival, and at Montreal's Festival Des Ameriques. Tarragon plays have been produced by many theatres across and outside of Canada: in the U.S, Great Britain, Australia, Europe, and South America.

AWARDS AND AUDIENCES

Tarragon has a continued tradition of high artistic achievement. In 1994, we received more Dora award nominations than any other theatre in Toronto. Our Governor General Award playwright recipients include Judith Thompson, John Krizanc, Ann Marie MacDonald, Joan MacLeod, Guillermo Verdecchio, Morris Panych, and Jason Sherman. Our Chalmers Award winners include David French, John Murrell, Tom Walmsley, Don Hannah, Ken Garnhum, Judith Thompson, and Michel Tremblay (Tarragon has been a pioneer producer of Quebec Playwrights in translation). Mallory Gilbert, is a recipient of the Brenda Donohue Award for her distinguished contribution to the theatre community and the Chalmers National Award for Arts Administration in 1998. Urjo Kareda, was honoured in 1995 with an Order of Canada.

In the 1998/1999 season, we held 230 performances of 7 Tarragon productions; paid attendance was 70,000; our current subscription base is over 3000. New audiences

continue to be attracted through our own productions, and through visiting productions in the Extra Space.

TARRAGON SPRING ARTS FAIR

This free event was inaugurated by Andy McKim in 1985. This exciting arts event, will take place on May 27 & 28, and features theatre, performance art, dance, readings and more. Performances take place all over the theatre, in the Extra Space, the studio, the prop-shop, the wardrobe, offices and places you would never expect. Please encourage your students to attend this free, fun, carnival type event. We have also begun to recruit a large number of students as volunteers for this event. Please call the theatre closer to the time if you are interested.

TARRAGON PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS

All the students who come to the Tarragon Theatre are a very important part of our audiences. Many of our plays deal with subjects that are of great interest to young people. Students have enjoyed seeing productions that, though not written specifically for them but deal with issues that are perhaps pertinent to their own lives. Thought, humour, and innovation replace spectacle and students begin to realize that many different kinds of theatre are possible. At our student matinees, we attempt to give our students an exciting and intensive theatre-going experience. We offer pre-show tours, so that students can gain a full picture of the theatre that they will be attending. This year, we will also be launching pre-show discussions and workshops concerning the play that they will be attending. Of course we continue to offer post-performance discussions so that students can comment and ask their questions “in the moment” with various members of the cast. We are in the process of expanding our educational programs this year and input from teachers and students regarding our educational programs would be greatly appreciated.

Spring Training Project

Tarragon’s work with young people extends beyond their attendance at performances. Every spring, we offer the Tarragon Theatre Spring Training Project where we select a group of talented young people to participate in an intensive series of workshops led by professionals in the field. These workshops are text based and result in a performance at the annual Spring Arts Fair.

Young Playwriting programs

Being a playwright’s theatre, we have decided to implement programs for young writers as well as young actors. Our first program in this regard is the annual Under 20 for Under Twenty Playwriting competition. We accept submissions from Ontario resident writers who are under the age of twenty on January 15, 2000. All plays must be under twenty minutes in length. The winner receives \$250.00 and a professional workshop reading of their play at the Spring Arts Fair. We held this contest for the first time last year and it was a great success. A few teachers made the writing of the plays a class

project. Again, viewing the free play-readings during December could be a useful tool in this process.

Tarragon Young Playwright's Unit

This is an exciting new program designed specifically for young people aged 15 – 19 who have a strong interest in writing. Please call Kristen Van Alphen or Jenny Macdonald at (416) 536-5018 ext229 if you are interested.

Co-op Placements

Tarragon also takes on co-op students from the secondary and post secondary levels. Practice studies are made available in both administrative and production areas. There are no co-op placements available in terms of performance but through their co-op placements students are able to observe and experience the inner workings of a theatre environment.

Career Days

Tarragon also offers career days with tours and discussions for students considering a career in theatre or for those who wish to research it for a project. These days must be arranged a few weeks in advance. Please call Kristen Van Alphen, or Jenny Macdonald if you are interested.

Thanks to the generous support of Petro Canada, our Theatre training for young people program encompasses workshop classes for high school students and educators, high-school matinees, services for high schools and drama festivals, and training and performance projects for the Spring Arts Fair.

We hope that you have found this study guide to be interesting and informative. Thank you for attending *GOOD BONES*. We look forward to having you back for one of our many of our productions here at Tarragon.