

TARRAGON THEATRE

study guide for students and educators



Inspired by the book by Phil Jenkins

Starring

**Pierre Brault, Susan Coyne, Timothy Hill,
David Jansen, Lisa Norton Kristen van Ginhoven**

Directed by Brian Quirt

Set & costumes designed by Carolyn M. Smith

Lighting designed by Paul Mathiesen

Music composed by Ian Tamblyn

Stage Manager: Fiona Jones

March 7 to April 15, 2001

About the An Acre of Time study guide:

This study guide has been created so that your theatre experience at Tarragon is a fulfilling and engaging one. We hope that it will help create discussions, generate ideas and prompt many questions.

The An Acre of Time study guide was compiled by Kristen Van Alphen and Mary Wood in Tarragon's **OutReach** department.

Special thanks and acknowledgements to Tim Chapman, Urjo Kareda, Kendra Fry and Jason Sherman for their contributions.

The An Acre of Time study guide is divided into several sections.

1. **Themes and theatrical elements** in An Acre of Time.
2. **Pre show lesson plans** for your class grounded in the Dramatic Arts curriculum.
3. **Post show lesson plans** for your class grounded in the Dramatic Arts curriculum.
4. **Additional resources** including information about Jason Sherman plays and current newspaper articles about An Acre of Time.

We encourage you to contact us should you have questions or comments at 416-536-5018 x243.

Discussions for An Acre of Time

Jason Sherman's adaptation of An Acre of Time:

A few years ago, after hearing Phil Jenkins read from his book An Acre of Time which traces the history of Ottawa's LeBreton flats, Jason Sherman approached Jenkins and asked for permission to adapt his story for the stage. The process of adapting a book to a play is quite different than creating one's own play. First, the novel An Acre of Time is a historical book that has a lot of historical information about the LeBreton flats. Sherman looked, "*For how information could be used where it didn't feel like information for the sake of information and was connected emotionally to the story*". He decided to create a character who does not exist in the book. Julia, the protagonist works as a surveyor in Ottawa.

Sherman explored two elements when he wrote the play An Acre of Time:

- 1) **Julia's path** beyond her technical surveying job: What does this land mean to her? Does she have a connection with it? Is there a "synchronicity" or reason for her to do the survey? In the play, the acre she has been sent to survey reminds her of a past picnic spent with her husband and daughter. Soon afterwards her daughter drowns and dies in the Ottawa river- Julia is haunted by thoughts of her deceased daughter, and struggles to give these memories their own place, while performing the survey.
- 2) The **actual history** of the LeBreton flats and the incorporation of its "ghosts" into the play, including their connection to Julia's story (an invention of Sherman's).

After two years of theatrical workshops in Ottawa, Sherman began to merge the history of the acre with Julia's own personal history. It became clear which historical figures merge with people from Julia's own past. As An Acre of Time progresses, the merging between the historical figures, the present, and Julia's past becomes fluid and gets jumbled up in Julia's mind. This 'jumbling' allows Julia to learn more about the land, in tandem with learning more about herself, as one is not kept separate from the other.

An Acre of Time explores the survey as a tool for Julia to finally mourn her daughter and how Julia experiences the mourning process. Julia discovers she can move on without betraying her daughter, as the journey of the play (the 'jumbling') arms her with the strength to let go, set free, and yet still remember.

Actors playing multiple characters:

As an audience, when we see an actor play different characters on stage, it immediately reinforces the notion that the play is not naturalistic (this works with the stylized set design). We are asked to believe, in An Acre of Time, that characters transform into different people, sometimes with the slightest turn of the head. Since so many different characters are played from the past and the present, it is interesting to observe:

- What physical characteristics does each individual character develop? (voice, gestures, posture etc)
- Do the multiple characters played by one actor within themselves share universal qualities? Are they linked through commonalities?

Actor	Character(s)
Susan Coyne	Julia (Ottawa native and land surveyor, mother of Louise)

Lisa Norton	Robin (summer co-op student), Louise (Julia's daughter), the LeBreton nieces and others
Tim Hill	Tom (a native artist, scouting for a film) and all other native historical characters
Pierre Brault	Davidson (Julia's coworker from the "Planning and Design" department), Bill (Julia's ex-husband), Champlain, Dalhousie, various immigrant settlers
David Jansen	Stan (Julia's supervisor and a recent widower), Stegmann (first surveyor of the flats), LeBreton (British land owner after whom the flats are named), various immigrant settlers
Kristen van Ginhoven	Danielle (Julia's French Canadian coworker), Delores Couillard (former resident of Duke House on LeBreton flats), various immigrant settlers

An Acre of Time is a survey of both the land and of Julia's life. The play is framed in Julia's unusual request to the National Capital Commission that one acre be preserved for remembrance. Her request is repeated at the end of the play and brings these concepts full circle. An Acre of Time is Julia's defense to the commission, and ultimately to us.

Conflict:

Julia's main conflict is finding a way to move forward (letting go of her daughter's death) without turning her back on the past (without forgetting her daughter). This essential tension is heightened throughout the play.

Fluid vs. Concrete (Water vs. Land / Circles vs. Straight Lines):

Julia as a surveyor works constantly with land. However, it is the water where her daughter died that holds significance (we are constantly reminded that we can hear the waterfalls from the LeBreton flats). The actual set design for An Acre of Time features a playing space surrounded by mirrors – the reflection makes the central rectangle appear to float. This metaphoric water encircles the actors and Julia is figuratively trapped on the "land".

An immediate conflict is through Julia's work; as surveyor that she must *appraise* the land and impose measurements on it. She is "forcing" something that is fluid to be defined within straight lines. This is to be done scientifically, without emotion or opinion. Straight lines do not exist in nature; Julia imposes structure on the land without regard for its subtleties and contours (just as progress marches on without regard for history). However, through her journey Julia gains a regard for the land, and its history, that allows for her personal and emotional rebirth (she loses rigidity and gains fluidity). One way this is symbolized is by Julia finishing marking an acre (square, straight lines) with her daughter's reclaimed bracelet (circle).

The need for ritual:

This is about Julia's personal voyage which involves – **ritual** (Julia's need to have a proper ritual surrounding her daughter's death "*we never found her body, we didn't have a proper burial*"); **respect** (respect for her daughter's memory/life); **rebirth** (letting go of the past and freeing herself to live in the present). The circle of life is symbolized by Louise's bracelet which was lost

on the flats, is found by Robyn – the summer student - and is given to Julia at the end of the play. This marks the last corner of these here that Julia is measuring and sets her free.

Julia explains to the National Capital Commission, *“I’m asking you to remember what you are building on. We need rituals. To remember. To calm the spirits here, the angry as well as the playful, the loving as well as the lost. Rituals.”*

One theme present in this play is that of progress, existing, without regard for history and the detrimental effect that this can play

- In a relatively short period of time the place we call Canada has undergone massive development. Especially since the colonization of Canada (which began in the 1500’s) there has been a constant development of our land. Do we, as Canadians, respect and honour the history of our land? How or how not? What advantages are there to paying tribute to the past and its heritage?
- Today we have rapid urbanization, clearcutting of forests, pollution, waste, overfishing, extreme depletion of natural resources, and animals face the threat of extinction. Does this affect us and our future? What can we do, and how can looking to the past provide some answers?
- The play tells the story of the flats and its inhabitants. Does this acre reflect the history of land in other parts of Canada? Do you think this acre is meant to be representative of the country as a whole, or is it a story unique to the LeBreton flats?
- What has been the development in your community? Is there development around your home? How old is your home? What may have been there before? Is the development in your community being accomplished in a positive way? Are natural resources being compromised? How can you find more information on this?

Some quotes from An Acre of Time by Phil Jenkins:

- *“Before the invention of agriculture, a field needed no man-made borders. It was as wide as a savannah, or as narrow as a canyon floor. But the spread of farming forced the taming of the landscape. The taming was done by measurement.”*
- *“When the Europeans, this continent’s first boat people, came to Canada they brought, along with their guns and germs, their feet, rods, and acres. They imposed their acres on a land that before they arrived had flowed from sea to sea, joyfully free of measurement.”*
- *“On each new building, include a picture and the story of the one it replaces...”*

Water:

- Water is an element that has symbolic meaning in literature
 - Water can symbolize life, a purification, a cleansing
1. It was water, through the Ocean and the rivers, that lead Champlain to Canada. Waterways were the highways of the past.
 2. Capitalizing on water has meant prosperity for many parts of Canada (Hydro Quebec, Niagara Falls). Scientists predict that in the near future Canada may sell some of it’s Water to countries like the United States for large amounts of money
- ⇒ Elizabeth, the niece of LeBreton, says, *“Mr. Perley understands the power of water, the ebb and flow of it, the push and pull of it, the rolling, pounding, unceasing availability of it”*
- Julia’s daughter drowned in the Ottawa River
 - Constant Penency’s gravestone is thought to be in the Ottawa River
 - John Stegman the first surveyor on the acre died one stormy night aboard a ship in Lake Ontario

Elements of Design:

Set Design

Usually, before rehearsals begins the designer meets 3 or 4 times (for a period of 4 to 8 hours) with the director An Acre of Time is directed by Brian Quirt with set design by Carolyn M. Smith. The designer and director thoroughly discuss the play to ensure both parties share a similar vision of the play, and explore how this vision will be represented through scenic design. There are many different locations in An Acre of Time and the set needs to be versatile enough to create an environment for each of these settings.

During An Acre of Time setting includes areas such as:

- A restaurant
- The inside of a home
- Outside on the empty Lebreton Flats
- A trailer

It will be interesting to take notice of the following:

- where on the stage certain scenes take place ?
- how scenes are blocked?

A stage that has the audience in front as well as stage right and left reinforces that the show the audience is witnessing *is* theatre – a vehicle to tell a story. Therefore, in An Acre of Time, where audience members are able to look across and past the stage to see other audience members, additional emphasis on the actors (and the story they are telling) and reinforces the non-naturalistic approach to the set design.

The stage for An Acre of Time is a long raked rectangular set that could be called a thrust stage as the audience surrounds three full sides of the playing area. Like any artistic choice, the decision to produce a show with a thrust stage implies certain connotations about the play. In this case, the thrust stage forces the audience to be implicated in the action – when Julia addresses the Commission the audience is part of that jury. Her pleas are to us as much as to those actors representing the Commission onstage. It also reinforces the universality of the ideas addressed in the script: the acre is representative of all our land and we are representative of all who inhabit that land and make choices about it.

The designer, Carolyn Smith had abstract images painted on the set in colours of deep green, yellow and black, which resemble a topographic map. This idea of looking at the ground from above the acre is explored in one of Julia's monologues:

“At last I came to an aerial photograph, taken not long ago. Not of the flats alone, but of the city. A city I had never left. My world. I leaned into the wind, swooping and diving. I saw the hospital in which I'd been born, the home in which I'd grown up, the home in which I'd been living. I saw the buildings in which I'd been educated, and married, where I worked and where I played. Here was my life, contained as it was, on a piece of paper. I could see it, playing itself out. Or was I only seeing parts of it, the parts that made themselves seen and heard.”

The actual set design for An Acre of Time features a playing space surrounded by floor mirrors – the reflections that these produce makes the central rectangle appear to float. This metaphoric water encircles the actors and Julia is figuratively trapped on the “land” that she must conquer and befriend.

Sound design

Through its text and characters An Acre of Time brings to discussion many broad themes, scenes are played out in a multitude of settings and in a similar way sound is used to further drive and expand the world of the play within the theatre space.

How does the original music, which begins the play, make you feel – does it set a certain tone or give clues about the nature of the work?

Ambient Sound:

Ambient sound is sound that is not necessarily noticed. The fact that it is played at an almost unconscious level is part of its power. Ambient sound masks room tone and creates other environments (such as crickets in a forest at night, or a leaky faucet in a basement). Ambience emulates those everyday sounds which we have learned to tune out but which offer indications to where we are. In this play, ambient sound employs, at times, a white noise effect – the audience cannot differentiate between the sound of the falls and that of traffic

Through An Acre of Time, sound is also a trigger for both memory and history. More than once, the sound of a train helps boost us into Julia's past – it is a memory trigger of the last time she saw Louise before she set off with her father and the awful moment in which Julia meets her husband returning, childless, from the country. To reinforce returning in time on the LeBreton flats, sound changes from the white noise (which represents both traffic and the falls) to day birds which would have existed when the flats were populated with trees and therefore home to wildlife. Subtly, the audience is given clues about the type of environment that is being created onstage.

Lighting

Since there are several realities in the play: *world of commission*, *world of story*, *world of Julia's mind*, the lights flip from all those worlds.

During different scenes there are rectangular light shapes projected onto the huge square backdrop. These projected rectangles emphasize the constriction, the boundaries needed to create an acre. The lighting then adds to Julia's conflict of *circle vs. straight lines* (see under *conflict*).

Costumes

When designing wardrobe pieces, the costume designer considers several elements as part of the costume creation.

Research

- Through discussion with the director the costume designer will decide on a concept for the costumes. The designer then looks through resources according to the period they have chosen such as old magazines, catalogues, picture books or films. For An Acre of Time the designer looked through current fashion magazines and Toronto stores for research.

Looking at the script

- The designer also works from indications within the play's script. In An Acre of Time, the fact that the characters were all land surveyors and the actors would be playing a multitude of characters influenced the choice of neutral costumes so that actors could easily transfer from one character to the next, and as audience members we would focus on the actors as opposed to the costumes.

Practical considerations

- Designers must also think practically when designing costumes. For instance, some considerations are: what will allow the actors to move about the stage as required; costumes

that remain effective under certain lighting; and costumes that can be created within the designers allocated budget.

Artistic choices

- The designer continues to study the script and looks for hints into the characters' personality and then makes artistic choices for the colour of the costumes, their shape, the fabrics to be used etc. Period will dictate shape, colour, fabric, footwear, skirt length etc.

In An Acre of Time, Carolyn Smith designed the costumes. Smith chose colours that were very neutral and earthlike. She focused on the actors and their story.

Props

To reinforce the costume choices the props for An Acre of Time are not naturalistic. The maps, and architectural drawings are on blank pieces of paper and when characters are drinking from glasses they are not filled. The props are minimal in all respects but the survey equipment – since the survey is the central image and driving force of the story these props are as real as possible, and gain emphasis through their contrast with the unnatural set and prop design.

Discussion ideas

How would this play change if the actors were given different costumes or costume pieces for each character? Would the action onstage be different if natural props were used in every instance?

Pre show Lesson Plan 1
Acting/Script Analysis in An Acre of Time:

Objectives:

- *Demonstrate an understanding of subtext, motivation, and status in the development of a character*
 - *Interpret and present a dramatic text*
- Ontario Dramatic Arts curriculum

Warm-up:

- Lead the students in a physical warm-up to prepare them

Activity:

- Divide the students into **groups of two**
- Distribute minimal script from An acre of Time faced down (please see attached scripts)
- Ask the students to decide who is character “**A**” and who is character “**B**” without looking at the script
- Once they have established the characters allow the students a few minutes to work on the scripts

You can use several coaching techniques for the students to work through the script. Allow a few minutes after each direction for them to rehearse and pick one or two groups to present each one in front of the class.

1. **A** speaks very calmly while **B** is very agitated
2. Ask them to pick **3** places to **pause** within the script
3. Ask them to practice the script with **A** yelling and **B** whispering
4. Perform it with **B** standing and **A** sitting down (and vice versa)

Ask the students to perform the minimal script and continue performing into an extended improvisation

- Did performing the text in different ways give you insights into the character?
- What were they?
- After the presentations the class can gather around and discuss the script:

Which gender were the characters? Two males? Two females? One male and one female? Why do you think that? Are there any hints within the script to support your hypothesis?

Looking at An Acre of Time's **minimal script**:

What is the nature of the characters' relationship?

What will be an actor's challenges in performing this scene to an audience?

Extension Possibilities:

- After seeing An Acre of Time the students can compare and contrast what their scene analysis with the performance they attend
- Were any acting choices the same? Did it give them a special insight into that scene?

An Acre of Time minimal script

A: Who's This?

B: My mother.

A: How old is she here?

B: Twenty, twenty-one.

A: You've got her eyes..... pause... When did she die?

B: Did I say she died?

A: No, but. I guess I just assumed. Am I wrong?

B: Nope.

A: Well. Did you want me to think I was wrong?

B: Nope.

A: What did you want me to think?

B: Nothing, I just couldn't remember telling you, that's all.

A: Maybe I should go.

B: No, stay...

**Pre Lesson Plan:
Adapting a text from Novel to a Performance Piece (2 days)**

Objective:

- Create drama through research or the interpretation of a source
The Ontario Arts Curriculum

Warm-up:

- Discuss concept of **interpretation**
- Distribute to each student (face down) a photograph (a single picture yields a number of different stories and different people see different things) from a photographic magazine, or the local newspaper
- Ask each student to write in their journal a story about the photograph
- Divide the students into groups of 4
- The students should discuss similarities between their stories (plot, setting, characters, mood) and differences.
- Students are encouraged to explore why they made certain choices for their story
- Ask each group to pick one of the stories among the 4 and orally present the stories to the class
- A larger group discussion can occur discussing the similarities and differences among the groups (Were there any similar themes?)

Activity:

The play An Acre of Time by Jason Sherman, produced at the Tarragon Theatre, is an adaptation from the book An Acre of Time by Ottawa based writer Phil Jenkins.

Adaptations of literary works are common.

This exercise takes an excerpt from the book An Acre of Time and students adapt it into a performance piece. Students will experience the collective creative process of adapting a text and also see how Sherman incorporated (how much or how little) of the text in Tarragon's production of An Acre of Time. Students will also achieve a deeper understanding of the character Constant Penency.

1. Distribution of the excerpt from An Acre of Time by Phil Jenkins (see text below)
 - Explain that this was a petition by the Algonquins, one of whom was Constant Penency (a character in the play) to the King of England in 1840.
2. Divide the students into groups of 5
 - Ask a student to read the excerpt to the class
 - Briefly discuss issues raised by the story (*land claims, promises, quality of life, family life, the environment*)
 - Discuss the possibilities of how to present the excerpt as a performed piece: *with a narrator, without a narrator, adding characters, extracting character, what are the main ideas, the message you want to represent while being true to the text? Will you use direct excerpts from the text?*
 - Students work in their groups and develop a script for their adaptation of the petition
 - Encourage them to start perhaps through improvisation-
 - Teacher facilitates the development of the scenes by going from group to group
 - Students perform their piece in front of the class

Post- Activity:

- Discussion comparing and contrasting choices made for the adaptation occurs
- What elements were similar or dissimilar?
- Ask the students to pay close attention to how Jason Sherman adapted the character of Constant Penency into the play An Acre of Time

Forty-two years after the 1798 petition, in the spring of 1840, the Algonquins and Nipissings were still coming to the Lake of Two Mountains in summer. Once again they made the annual harvest of their grievances. The main complaint now was that none of their earlier petitions had ever raised a royal eyebrow. They were unwittingly being snared in that old British schoolyard trick where one kid hands another a note; on one side it says, "How do you keep a petitioning Indian distracted for hours? Turn over." The paper says the same on the other side.

Still, despite this repeated insult, the natives kept on trying to get some attention, in an adopted language and in a style that remained an unsettling mix of dignity and obeisance, echoing the pleas of an innocent man resisting arrest. They kept their hand up, and wouldn't pit it down. Their petition of 1840 was delivered March 9. Again the punctuation has been polished, and some repetition edited out

Start:

Father,

We have frequently represented our grievances to our Father your predecessor, but we are sorry to say to very little effect. The only answer we received was that they were sent across the big salt lake to Our Great Father the King, who would pay attention to them and send us an answer.

We much fear that our Great Father and present Good Mother have never heard of or seen these writings in question, for from what we have heard of them they would certainly have sanctioned our demands that are but moderate and just, in conformity to the wishes and instructions of Our Great Father of Blessed Memory King George the Third. A copy of which we have in our possession, given to our tribes by our late good father Sir William Johnson, dated 24th December 1763, when our ancestors were told by him that we should always have the enjoyment of our hunting grounds, without being molested by any strangers, until we thought proper to sell them to the King for the use of our white brethren.

Father, we have always been good loyal subjects. We have fought and bled during the two last American Wars, and are ready to do so again, whenever called upon.

We were formerly rich and independent. Our hunting grounds embraced a vast territory. They abounded in rich furs of every description, our forests were alive with deer. We lived well, and had wherewith to clothe our wives and children comfortably, and we were happy.

About forty years ago, when the Whites first came amongst us to settle on our hunting grounds, they were good and grateful. We took pity on them, received them with open arms. We knew them to be the children of our great Father the King, as well as ourselves, therefore had no objection to them cultivating our land for the support of their families. Always bearing in mind that when our hunting grounds were ruined, destitute of furs, it was at our option to sell them to the representative of Our Father for his disposal.

That day is now arrived which we never expected to see. Your red children the Nipissings and Algonquins have never been in the habit of tilling the ground. From time immemorial our chief and only dependence for a livelihood sprang from the chase from which we procured abundance. Not so now. Our beaver and other fur have been destroyed by the constant fires made by the lumber men in our majestic forests. Our deer have disappeared. Our timber to the amount of hundreds of thousands of pounds is annually taken, but from which we derived not the least benefit. We are starving, Father. Our wives and children are naked. Our traders will give us no more credit. Why? Because we can procure no furs and of course are unable to pay.

Father – For these many years past we your Children have been in the habit of receiving certain annual rents from squatters and other individuals who have clandestinely taken possession of certain islands and divers lots of land on both banks of the Ottawa River. But, strange to say, on the eve of our departure for that purpose our Superintendent came and explained to us an extract of a report, which in manner prohibits us from doing so.

Father, we have only you, the representative of Our Good Mother across the Salt Lake, to look up to for protection. We are persuaded, when you are more acquainted with our deplorable situation, you will immediately listen to the prayers of Your Children, to be allowed to go and gather these small rents, and that you may be pleased to order one of your officers to accompany us with authority for doing so. We have made innumerable complaints against these intruders, as well as against lumber men; we received many promises from Government, but all turned out in smoke.

We can no longer depend on the chase for support. We must set ourselves to the hoe, or else starve.

Father, our brethren of Upper Canada receive a very handsome annual remuneration, in merchandise to a certain amount, for such part of their hunting grounds as has been sold by them to Government, and besides they have retained most tracts of their best lands for their own cultivation. While we, who possessed by far the most extensive and richest hunting grounds, have been deprived of the most valuable parts of the same, by the Upper Canada government.

We request of you further to be pleased to assume the whole of our hunting grounds in the name of Our Good Mother the Queen, with the exception of Isle aux Allumettes, which have for these many years back reserved. Many squatters are settled thereon. We have no objection that they should remain by acre. But that no other strangers will be allowed to come and annoy us.

At the bottom of the petitions, the grand chiefs of the Algonquins and Nipissings would make their marks, and the scribe preparing the petition put their names, spelt as he heard them.

One of the petitioners was Constant Penency, Penency being an English interpretation of the Algonquin word partridge. Constant, of the Partridge band, was the Algonquin whose hunting territory included the acre.

Excerpt from *An Acre of Time: The Enduring Value of Place* by Phil Jenkins, published by Macfarlane Walter & Ross, used with permission of the publisher.

Lesson Plan: Ritual

Objective:

- *Identify and describe various dramatic forms (e.g., ritual...) and describe the historical origins of these forms*
The Ontario Arts Curriculum

Warm-up:

Ritual: *a frequently repeated action or ceremony that has symbolic significance*

- Discuss with the students the definition of rituals
- Lead into a Brainstorming session of rituals

You may look at rituals of today (marriage, funeral, high school graduation, hockey night in Canada) and rituals of yesterday.

- Discuss what make up the rituals: the food, the lights, the music etc.
- To rituals still speak to us, are there some rituals that seem dead but we still are a part of
- Is it important to create our own rituals? Do we ever borrow rituals from other cultures?

Activity:

- Divide the students into groups of 5
- Each group is responsible for a ritual (marriage, funeral, coming of age etc)
- Each group is responsible to research how the ritual is performed in an another culture (Native Canadian, Chinese, Caribbean, Irish etc).
- Each group performs their ritual in front of the class

- They must incorporate appropriate **music** (obtained from a library or music store), **lighting**, **dancing**, **speaking**, **costumes**, **text**, **food** (if appropriate) based on their research
- A written research paper may be submitted as part of a written component
- Students compare and contrast the different rituals from those they are familiar with

Post Performance Lesson Plan

Research Project to Create Community History Play

Objectives:

- *An understanding of methods for developing roles that clearly express a range of feelings, attitudes, and beliefs (e.g. research into the past)*
 - *An understanding of how role is communicated through language, gesture, costume, props, and symbol*
 - *Identify and pursue appropriate questions in beginning to research a topic*
 - *Explain connections between their own lives and the metaphor or theme in a drama*
- The Ontario Arts Curriculum

Warm-up:

- Facilitate a discussion about the local community with the class:
- ➔ *Who were the European founders of the city you live in? How long ago was the city founded?*
What is the cultural make-up of the city today? What was the cultural make-up of the city 20, 50, 100 years ago? What are the main businesses of the community? What were the main businesses 50 years ago? Are there Parks and Recreation facilities, theatres, movie theatres, shopping centres in your community? From your home how long would it take you to drive to a rural community from where you live (or an urban community)?
- ➔ *You could have a local map of the community and analyse each block to direct the discussion*
- ➔ *Discuss the history of the school, its graduates etc.*

Activity:

The aims of this project is for the students to create a performance piece based on the oral stories of local community members (in direct relation to An Acre of Time and its story of a place). To further develop knowledge of technical theatre (costumes, props etc.) students will be engaged in a research component

The preparation for this project can begin prior to seeing An Acre of Time, however watching the performance may provide insight and creative ideas for the students once they have begun the project.

Section 1:

Each student interviews an older member of the community
Possibilities include:

- *Grandparent*
- *Parent*
- *Teacher*
- *Senior citizen at a Retirement Home*
- *Neighbour*
- *Community Worker*
- *Archivist*
- *Member of the Religious community (Rabbi, Minister etc.)*

The student asks the community member to tell the story of the most vivid moments of the community
(*end of World War 2, trying to find employment during the depression, Canada's Centennial Celebrations, the Maple Leafs winning the Stanley cup in 1967*).

The interviewee shares something that marked them, *that was distinct to their experience living in the community.*

- ♦ The student transcribes the interview (perhaps from a tape-recorded session of the interview).
- ♦ The story should be written in the first person "*I was 7 when the war ended...*"
- ♦ Encourage the student to include **repetitions, idiosyncrasies, sayings** that are naturally articulated during the interview. This personalizes the text and creates a **unique voice**.

Section 2:

When students have completed the interviews each student take turns in class reading their story
They can also share their experience of the interview process

Write down the main ideas (themes) of each story on the board (overhead)

Group the stories on the board that have similar themes, ideas etc.

Divide the students into groups (of about 5) that share similar themes, time period

Part A:

Writing the Script:

The students must write a script, incorporating all the characters

They may need to break up the monologue, add dialogue, remove dialogue; they may add a narrator

Part B:

Research:

In professional theatre research into the production is a vital component of character development and creation of scenic design (including props, costumes etc)

Each student is responsible for an aspect of research:

Students are encouraged to ask their interviewees questions which may facilitate their research

- ➔ **Costumes:** students research which clothes were worn during the time of the story for the characters including appropriate hairstyle, colours ,etc (*resources may include going to the library, looking at old Eaton's catalogues, searching via the internet*).
During their performance students wear the closest resemblance of the "period" costume and provide photocopies costume designs or personal drawings
Students should also research during the period if people made their own clothes, bought clothes (ask these questions during their interview)
- ➔ **Props:** students make a prop list based on the props needed for their performance piece and research which props would be used at that time. i.e. If the character is talking on the phone, what kind of phone would they use?
Props also include the kind of furniture used at the time.
Students create replicas of props for their performance piece.
- ➔ **Set Design:** Students research what the buildings (homes) were made of (stucco, brick, stone), take photocopies from books, pictures from today of what it looks like, were the roads paved, gravel, dirt? Look at sound (what music was playing at the time) incorporate it into the performance if possible

Students write a written analysis of their research as is relevant for costumes, props and set design.

Section 3:

Students perform their piece in front of the class.

Extension Possibilities:

- ➔ Students could write a journal throughout the development process
- ➔ Keep a research log of their different sources: interview, library, internet, historical plaques around the community

Plays by Jason Sherman:

- 1. None Is Too Many**
Style: Drama
Synopsis: An adaptation of the book by Irving Abella and Harold Troper about Canada's refusal to admit Jewish refugees into the country before, during and after WWII.
- 2. Patience**
Style: Drama
Synopsis: Reuben has it all. Then, with almost biblical abruptness - think of the story of Job - Reuben's universe tumbles, and almost everything he has come to count on turns to dust.
- 3. Reading Hebron**
Style: Comedy-Drama
Synopsis: A Toronto Jew uses a massacre in Israel to examine Palestinian oppression & his own responsibility for it. Nominated for the 1997 Chalmers Play Award.
- 4. The League of Nathans**
Style: Drama
Synopsis: Winner of the 1997 CAA Literary Award for Drama and the Chalmers Play Award. Ten years after their last meeting, three Jewish friends reunite in a Spanish synagogue, where they finally face a past they wish both to embrace and escape.
- 5. The Merchant of Showboat**
Synopsis: A Black Politician and a White Business man talk.
- 6. The Retreat**
Style: Drama
Synopsis: A film producer is attracted to the screenplay of a first time writer - which tells the story of a 17th century mystic - and then to the writer herself.
- 7. Three in the Back, Two in the Head**
Style: Drama
Synopsis: The son of a murdered arms designer confronts the CIA officer he believes responsible for ordering the termination of his father. Winner of the 1994 Governor General's Award for Drama.

for more information please visit the Playwrights Union of Canada web site
www.puc.ca