

# TARRAGON THEATRE

**study guide for students and educators**



# EARSHOT

**written and directed by morris panych**

STARRING **randy hughson**

**Written and directed by Morris Panych**

**Starring Randy Hughson**

**Set & costumes designed by Ken MacDonald**

**Lighting designed by John Thompson**

**Sound designed by Derek Bruce**

**Stage Manager: Gretel Meyer Odell**

**February 7 to March 18. 2001**

## **About the Earshot 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 Earshot study guide was compiled by Marin Conaughty and Mary Wood in Tarragon's **OutReach** department.

Special thanks and acknowledgements to Derek Bruce, Tim Chapman, Urjo Kareda, Andrea Lundy, Michael Hodge, Ken MacDonald, Andy McKim and Kristen Van Alphen for their contributions.

The Earshot study guide is divided into several sections.

1. **Themes and theatrical elements** in Earshot.
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 Morris Panych's plays and current newspaper articles about Earshot.

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

## Morris Panych: Playwright's Notes

I started working on this play a couple of years ago while I was trying to write another play. I live in one of those neighbourhoods where there are endless do-it-yourself projects. People inexplicably hammer and saw at all hours. The old man next door used to cut wood, while I was writing, sometimes for eight hours at a go, I have a very low tolerance for noise; I began to wear earmuffs while I was writing, along with the usual assortment of drugstore earplugs. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror one afternoon. It was a profoundly disturbing moment. It's hard to concentrate these days on anything, let alone work. On our tv's there are seventy-two channels. We are tuned in to everything possible, except, perhaps, our own thoughts. I just want a place where I can hear myself think. About a year ago I shoved an earplug so far into my eardrum that I had to go to emergency to have it removed. My mother used to say to me "You're too sensitive". Of course I completely tuned her out.

### Press Release excerpt written by Urjo Kareda:

Earshot is the story of Doyle, an intelligent, quick-witted man who nevertheless keeps himself holed up in his apartment, reclusive, beleaguered, unemployed and perhaps unemployable. He has been forced to disconnect himself from the world because of an unusual physical trait: he has acutely sensitive powers of hearing. Doyle can hear everything. Uncontrollably. He tunes in sounds from the apartment next door, sounds from the entire building, sounds from the whole city. He builds up intense relationships with his neighbours built simply on what he hears of their lives, and how he interprets these sounds. There is the old widow nostalgically playing a single old record [Mrs. Noon]; there is the macho longshoreman aggressive with do-it-yourself projects; and there is the unsuccessful would-be writer hammering out his manuscripts and noisily crumpling rejection letters. But the most tenderly overheard of them all is Valerie, Doyle's unknown beloved, whose erratic romantic life he intimately tracks through the walls. In Morris Panych's Earshot, malady becomes metaphor. Doyle's life is a fable of manic isolation filled with comic twists and reversals which characterizes this idiosyncratic, gifted playwright's ironic and sardonic world-view.

## Earshot Theme Analysis

### Alienation:

- Earshot is set in a non-specific town or city.
- The non-specific setting helps create a certain universality or common experience that the audience can relate to more personally.
- The only character, Doyle, lives in a run-down apartment building and is surrounded on every side by his neighbours - people he does not know but has intense relationships with based simply on what he *hears* of their lives.
- It is interesting to note that as we live more and more surrounded by people, we know them less and less.
- Doyle lives a solitary life with no friends or any relationship with family.
- Doyle's neighbours also lead very solitary lives: *Mrs. Noon an elderly widow spends her days calling out her dead husband's name; wheelchair bound Mr. Plimley a writer who lives alone and has a slight drinking problem; Remple the solitary retired downstairs neighbour; and Valerie who has a less than successful love life*
- Doyle's hearing drives him to a state where he lives in perpetual alienation and isolation from others. Doyle assumes that he knows his neighbours simply from hearing them as opposed to actually engaging in relationships with them.

Although contemporary society may have “everything” (material comfort, communication mechanisms like the telephone, world wide web etc) are we too living alienated lives? Do we know our neighbours? Coworkers? Classmates? Office cubicle mates? Do you get involved to know and help the members of your community? How?

### **Loss of Privacy:**

- Because Doyle has extra-sensitive hearing he knows everything that is going on in his neighbours' lives.
- Doyle talks about telemarketers phoning up and asking people questions. Our homes are no longer our sacred space; consumerism has entered our homes.
- Doyle's extra-sensitive hearing may be a parallel with our overly sensitive “nerve sensory” stimulating society

*Do you feel an invasion of privacy? Through telemarketing, massive advertising on the radio, television, billboards?*

### **Cynicism/ Hopelessness**

- Doyle is a tragic character; he falls hopelessly in love with a woman who does not know he exists. He plans on committing suicide and then another neighbour takes his own life “beating” Doyle to the task.
- During the play Doyle is cut off welfare and stays at home most of the day.
- Doyle has a very cynical view of the world because he hears too much.

### **The following are statements from Doyle help illustrate his cynicism:**

In reference to a social case worker, “...it would destroy the delicate take-a-number-and-I'll-be-right-with-you relationship we've built up over the months”

*“Is it better for people to have a bad opinion about you, or no opinion at all?”*

*“He's the sort of man who drills a hole in the wall, just to have something to fill in...”*

Why do you think that Doyle is cynical and negative?

Why was comedy used as a vehicle for representing negative qualities?

Is it therapeutic for us as audience members to laugh at someone else's misery? Does Doyle represent a side of us that is also cynical?

Have you ever met anyone that displays similar cynical attitudes?

What are some things that you are cynical about? The environment? The future? Do you believe that your involvement will help change things?

Have you ever “made a difference”? How did it feel?

### **Doyle's Romanticism**

- Although Doyle can be cynical at times he spends the greater length of the play obsessing over and declaring his unrequited love for neighbour Valerie.
- His idealizations of Valerie are typically romantic. For instance, because he “*long ago made an agreement to never make myself known to you [Valerie]*,” Doyle visits Valerie at the department store cosmetic counter and buys moisturizer, without revealing himself, in order spend a few moments with her. In traditional romantic fashion Doyle has written an anonymous declaration of love for Valerie (Doyle shares characteristics with French romantic hero Cyrano de Bergerac). Although he prepares to take his own life Doyle says to Valerie,

*"I don't expect you to come running to my door at this point; but it would be a nice surprise. Let's say I'm hopefully pessimistic".*

## One Person Show

Earshot is a 90 minute one-man show starring Randy Hughson. One-man shows are particularly challenging for an actor because:

- The actor has to be able to "carry" the energy of the show and have the ability to hold the focus of the entire audience;
- All attention is on the actor, he/she must rely on themselves to pace their performance;
- In a one person show there are no other actors to feed your energy;
- Specifically with Earshot Randy's character Doyle is constantly changing his ideas and certain lines seem to be like a stream of consciousness. This may prove difficult when starting to memorize the text.

*What changes/adjustments must an actor make to perform a one – person show?*

*How are one-person shows written? Similar to multi-character plays?*

*Why would a playwright choose to write a piece in this way? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having only one character to your piece? (think of the possibility of producing your show, costs etc)*

*Do you think this type of theatre is easy to follow? Does it elicit any particular emotion from the audience? Is it a more intimate experience between audience and actor?*

*In a play such as Earshot, where noise and hearing play such a large part, why do you think the playwright (Morris Panych) choose to not include – on stage – any of Doyle's neighbours?*

## Set Design

Playwright and director Morris Panych has been collaborating creatively with designer Ken MacDonald for the last 15 years. Because of their close relationship more detail goes into the designs. "When we're out for dinner we'll scribble designs on napkins," says MacDonald. They also travel once a year to see theatre in Europe and have seen, "well over a 100 plays together" As a result, after 15 years MacDonald and Panych have developed a "short hand of conversation" when it comes to design. Favourite painters like Raoul Dufy, Dali and Magritte have inspired MacDonald's designs.

Initially when approaching a design, like Earshot, MacDonald reads and tries to visualize the script. He tries to work with the idea of a single metaphor. For instance, it's like [Doyle] is trapped in a jail... OR...the room is closing in on him...etc.

Earshot is designed in forced perspective (definition: *manipulating visuals for the illusion of shortening natural images to look like the distance from one element to another is other than the real size. A designer may use forced perspective for shortening to exaggerate the perspective for design reasons*).

MacDonald chose forced perspective for several reasons:

1. How the set would work within the size of Tarragon's Extra Space.
2. He liked the idea that Doyle could listen easily at the ceiling to his neighbours (like Plimley above).
3. Forced perspective enables the audience to focus more on 1 person for the one-man show.
4. In this forced perspective the Earshot set is the shape of an old fashioned megaphone (the idea of the megaphone is revisited when Mrs. Noon listens to her old records). As well, the shape of a megaphone is the same as the turn of the century hearing aids that helped the hearing impaired.

Because of Doyle's meticulousness and precision in sound and observation, MacDonald's first instinct was to design a very tidy and meticulous set. But he then decided more theatrical to have fun and "go to town with it."

In forced perspective, the set is a very run-down bachelor apartment (with no real kitchen or visible washroom) most likely in a rooming house or bedsit.

MacDonald chose monochromatic colours for the set. He finds that otherwise, "colours tend to clash". MacDonald limited his palette and chose an accent of greys (to highlight the drabness of Doyle's surroundings), and rust for the leaking pipes (the wearing down of his apartment).

Other elements that also reinforce the run-down apartment are scraps of papers and clothes strewn across the floor, a broken sink mirror, and a mattress with foam coming out the bottom. This state of disarray may be a parallel with Doyle's inner torment and state of being.

MacDonald also helped paint the set, making sure that there were built-in shadows to heighten and create a hyper realistic effect.

## Sound Design:

The sound designer, Derek Bruce, had several meetings with the director (Morris Panych) before discovering the Earshot sound concept. However, it was challenging to have a solid idea of what the sound concept should be like (realistic, reverbed etc.) until there was a complete run-through (full rehearsal from beginning to end of the script) of the play as well as being in the actual performance space.

Because Earshot is a one-man show the sound designer is responsible for integrating the 5 other characters (Doyle's neighbours) into the performance.

Sound is also pivotal as Randy Hughson relies on the sounds to cue him. They give him support, and the ability to play off them, since there are no other actors. Therefore, the cues must be exactly the right sound that is understandable to Randy (and to the audience) at the exact right time.

Through its text and lead character, Doyle, Earshot relies heavily on sound cues to be able to include the audience. What does Doyle constantly hear?

- *Typewriters*
- *Whistling*
- *Mrs. Noon calling her dead husband Harold*
- *Mr. Plimley in his wheelchair*
- *A television in the background*
- *The world beyond the building with street drills, ice-cream truck etc)*



## Pre show Lesson Plan – Directing a One-Person Show

### Objective:

Demonstrate an understanding of the tasks and interrelated responsibilities of individuals in the production of theatre/  
Dramatic Arts Curriculum

### Discussion Topics:

- Directing a one-person show is significantly different than directing a conventional play.
- Directors oftentimes need to be responsible for the sound and set design of a play. Why would these two aspects be especially important in a one-person show?
- What does the term *subtext* mean to an actor, as well as to a director?

### Activity:

1. Divide the class into pairs – each couple will have the opportunity to be both director and actor.
2. Hand out the attached excerpt from Earshot (attached herewith) to each pair.
3. The students are to take turns directing each other in performing the excerpt. As a director, they are to focus on the following aspects of theatre:
  - a. Efficient use of the stage through blocking
  - b. Development of motivation, subtext, and tools for the actor
  - c. Sound design
  - d. Set design
4. Present the scenes to the class and compare different directorial choices.

### Extension Activities:

- In addition to rehearsing the basic blocking and delivery of the scene, each director may keep a journal detailing the unique challenges, differences and pleasures they encountered while directing the one-person scene.
- They may include ideas for sound design, as well as sketches of the set. As well, any research done to prepare for directing the scene could be added to this journal.
- When these scenes are presented, the director's journal could be presented and the class would be able to ask questions and comment on the scene.
- Students can write one-person shows of their own, focusing on lives of their heroes.
- One-person shows are an excellent way to explore character research activities. The class can focus on the research and discovery involved in creating a character by studying some existing one-person shows (such as Morris Panych's Solo collection).

## Pre show Lesson Plan - Sound

### Objectives:

*Demonstrate an understanding of volume, tone, pace*  
*Demonstrate an understanding of the basic process of voice production*  
Dramatic Arts Curriculum

Earshot's protagonist has extra-sensitive hearing. In the script Doyle states, "*Hear the pin drop, I can hear it dropp-ing!*"

The following exercises are to develop students' sensitivity to sound and stretch their creativity.

### Warm-Up:

- Ask students to sit in a circle on the floor with legs extended in front of them
- Explain to the students that they will try and recreate the sound of a rainstorm
- Remind the students that they must try and LISTEN during this exercise as to what they need to do next (*for optimal effect they should have their eyes CLOSED*)
- The sound will go from clockwise
- When they hear the sound on their right side wait 5 seconds and then copy it until they hear another sound on their right side
- The sounds build to form the rainstorm in the following sequence:

1. *Rubbing palms together*
2. *Snapping*
3. *Soft clapping*
4. *Thigh clapping*
5. *Banging legs against the floor*
6. *Thigh clapping*
7. *Soft clapping*
8. *Snapping*
9. *Rubbing palms*
10. *Silence*

*As an option the teacher can tap each student on the shoulder when they should start the next sound of the rainstorm.*

### Activity 1:

- Divide students into groups of 2
- Distribute the **Vocal-Listening** sheets (please see attached)
- The students sit back to back each holding a Vocal-Listening sheet
- One student "*vocalizes*" how he/she thinks one of the "*drawings*" would sound
- The other student tries to guess which drawing it is
- The students switch and repeat the exercise
- Ask for groups to vocalize a drawing in front of the class
- the class has to guess which drawing was vocalized (this could turn into a competition keeping track of points)
- In groups of 2 the students produce their own vocal diagrams and switch with another group, they hear what their "*drawings*" sound like

### Activity 2:

- Each student should have a piece of paper and a pencil
- Minimize the lights so the students can focus on listening

- Sitting alone the students are asked to concentrate on and write down all the sounds they hear over a period of a few minutes (including the teacher)
- Then there is a discussion about which sounds were heard? Were some sounds similar among all students?
- In small groups the students try and recreate a sound off their list and others try and guess which sound is being recreated

### Pre show Lesson Plan – Improvisation

#### Objectives:

*Demonstrate an understanding of focus and concentration in playing a role*  
*Demonstrate an understanding of how to adapt or modify roles based on the input of other roles players...*  
 Ministry of Education

#### Activity:

- Ask the students to sit in a circle
- Distribute strips of paper and ask the students to write on one strip:

**The setting** (where the action takes place)

And the other strip

**Who?** (who is in the scene, name 2 characters)

- Put the strips of paper in a bowl
- Ask for two volunteers to begin the improvisation
- From the **Improvisation Quote Sheet** (please see attached sheet) give the two actors a quote from Earshot
- Students also pick a **setting** and **who** instruction
- Students begin the improvisation from the quote and develop a scene from the line
- When another volunteer wants to take over they clap, the actors freeze
- Two new students pick a **setting**, **who** and **quote** instruction

## **Improvisation Quote Sheet from Earshot**

**Would you listen to all that gurgling over there!**

**No Mrs. Noon. Not Harold no. Most definitely not. It's only me**

**I need to cancel my phone service.**

**You should really be in bed with that headache.**

**Aspirin is above the kitchen sink on the left.**

**While I peering through all the neighbours mail boxes this morning,  
Plimley, I couldn't help notice something in yours-**

**Why don't they find better glue for those dinosaurs.**

**A man has to be in an awful big hurry, to leave and forget his leg.**

## Post show Lesson Plan - Set Design

### Objectives:

- *Develop an understanding of the elements of scenic design*
  - *Demonstrate an understanding of the function of design, lighting, and sound in the communication of a drama*
- Dramatic Arts Curriculum

Introduce the idea of the setting of Earshot

### Discussion Ideas:

- Earshot takes place now in an apartment building in an unspecified city
- Doyle is a lonely man with no friends or family who has a hearing condition that enables him to hear EVERYTHING (even the blood running through his veins)
- How would his cynicism/hopelessness be represented through the design (lighting, set, costumes etc.)?

### Activity:

- Divide the students into groups of 3
- In groups the students make a collage using many different resources to represent the atmosphere of the setting (remember setting usually encompasses **time, place** and **atmosphere**)
  - ➔ images from magazines, newspapers
  - ➔ written words from articles, famous quotations
  - ➔ from nature (leaves, twigs, etc.)
  - ➔ fabric swatches
  - ➔ different paper
  - ➔ card board boxes
  - ➔ tin cans
- Each group presents their collage (design) to the class explaining their choices for the materials and how it reinforces the setting of Earshot
- Students could have a written component submitted with their work to explain their design choices

### Activity 2:

- Working in the same groups, the students decide how they would physicalize the setting of Doyle's apartment in the set design (write initial ideas on poster paper)
- What colours would you use (for lighting, set pieces and props) to represent the apartment of a lonely, isolated man anonymous in a large city?
- What materials would be used as set pieces (metal, wood, plastic etc.)?
- What colour and fabrics would be used for Doyle's costume?
- Would you use the entire stage space?

## Post show Lesson Plan - One Man Shows

### Discussion Ideas:

- What changes must an actor make to perform a one – person show?
- How must one-person shows be written? Similar to prose plays?
- Why would a playwright choose to write a piece in this way? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having only one character to your piece?
- Do you think this type of theatre is easy to follow? Does it illicit any particular emotion from the audience?
- In a play such as *Earshot*, where noise and hearing play such a large part, why do you think the playwright (Morris Panych) choose to not include – on stage – any of Doyle's neighbours?

### Activity Ideas:

- Each kid can create a one-person show based upon the life of someone who they especially look up to. They will *become* this person and present the story. These should be short – no more than 5 minutes.
- This can be split into a either a writing and/or performing lesson.
- For performance: the class should work in couples – a director and performer respectively. This way everyone can realize how hard it is to be in a one-person show, and also how hard it is to direct one!
- For writing: Start by writing first about their own stories and lives. Brainstorm in groups – tell life stories to get the ideas and creativity flowing.

For a warm-up to this activity, grab some one-person shows and have the kids read them out loud in class. This will give them some starting point as to how to tell a story without characters to play off of. Mark Twain's one-man show is a great example.

## Playwright's Union of Canada synopsis of Plays by Morris Panych

- 1. 2 B WUT U R**  
**Style:** Drama  
**Synopsis:** Two high-school seniors search for themselves and each other in the debris of their own social construction.
- 2. 7 Stories**  
**Style:** Comedy  
**Synopsis:** A man is perched on the ledge of an apartment building, preparing to plunge to his death. All about him, the building's inhabitants pop in and out of their windows, revealing snippets of their own incongruous lives. As he contemplates the meaninglessness of his existence, he is unexpectedly and suddenly set free.
- 3. Last Call**  
**Style:** Musical comedy  
**Synopsis:** A post-nuclear cabaret.
- 4. Lawrence & Holloman**  
**Style:** Black Comedy  
**Synopsis:** This is a universe in which Camus meets Dali, where Goya meets Disney, where gunshots and bathtub drownings, disillusion and dismemberment become the Seventh Seal of the Grey Folannel set."Lawrence & Holloman is slick stuff indeed." - Toronto Sun
- 5. The Cost of Living (*one person show*)**  
**Style:** Drama  
**Synopsis:** A video extravaganza exploring the true nature of relationships, respect for yourself and others, and the struggle to understand sexuality, AIDS and social responsibility.
- 6. The Ends Of The Earth**  
**Style:** Comedy  
**Synopsis:** Some people will go to any length to escape the inevitable.
- 7. The Story of a Sinking Man (*one person show*)**  
**Style:** Drama  
**Synopsis:** A man talks to himself while slowly sinking to his death in quicksand.
- 8. Vigil**  
**Style:** Drama  
**Synopsis:** Is structured around what happens when an extremely self-centered and shallow person finds himself, through his own errors and inattentiveness, in a life and death situation with profound and far reaching consequences. A play of twisted circumstance, mistaken identity and surprising turns.

for more information visit the PUC website at [www.puc.ca](http://www.puc.ca)