

NORTHLIGHT THEATRE



STUDY GUIDE

Ernestine Ashworth spends her 17th birthday wondering what her place in the universe is. She celebrates her 18th, 41st, 70th and 101st birthdays all in the span of baking one birthday cake and in the process, she pursues family, dreams, love and the divinity with herself.

[Click here for a full show synopsis!](#)



*Click to find an
article and learn
more.*



*Click to watch a
video and expand
learning.*



*Find discussion
questions to ask
students.*

Created by Northlight Staff and Teaching Artist Stephanie Munoz

Meet the Team



DIRECTOR

Jessica Thebus

Jessica is a director of theater and an educator based in Chicago. Past Northlight credits include Into the Breeches!, The Book of Will, Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley, Shining Lives: A Musical, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Inherit the Wind and Red Herring. At Steppenwolf, she has directed Sex with Strangers, Intimate Apparel, Dead Man's Cell Phone, No Place Like Home, When the Messenger is Hot (also at 59 E 59th in NYC) and Sonia Flew. Other favorite projects: Richard III (Gift), In the Garden by Sarah Gmitter (Lookingglass), Buzzer by Tracy Scott Wilson (Goodman), Welcome Home Jenny Sutter (Next), As You Like It (Oregon Shakespeare), The Feast: an intimate Tempest (Chicago Shakespeare with Redmoon). She is Director of the Graduate Directing Program at Northwestern University.



PLAYWRIGHT

Noah Haidle

Noah Haidle's plays have premiered at the Goodman, Lincoln Center Theater, Roundabout, Long Wharf, Woolly Mammoth, Rattlestick, and many others. His plays include Mr. Marmalade and Vigils. He is a graduate of Princeton and The Juilliard School, where he was a Lila Acheson Wallace playwright-in-residence. He is the recipient of three Lincoln Center Lecompte Du Nouy awards, the Helen Merrill Award for emerging playwrights, the Claire Tow Award and an NEA/TCG Theatre Residency Grant..



[Click here to watch an interview with Haidle about his play Birthday Candles](#)



Andre Pluess

Sound Design



Sotirios Livaditis

Scenic Design



Rita Vreeland

Stage Manager



JR Lederle

Lighting Design



Rachel Anne Healy

Costume Design



Bren Coombs

Props Design



[Click here to read the full artistic teams bios](#)



Meet the Team

CAST



Kate Fry
ERNESTINE



Cyd Blakewell
ALICE/MADELINE/ERNIE



Chiké Johnson
MATT/WILLIAM



Samuel B Jackson
BILLY/JOHN



Timothy Edward Kane
KENNETH



Corrbette Pasko
JOAN/ALEX/BETH

BONUS!

[Click here to read a Chicago Tribune article about Kate Fry and her acting career](#)

[Click here to read an interview with Samuel B Jackson from his alma mater](#)



Setting of the Play

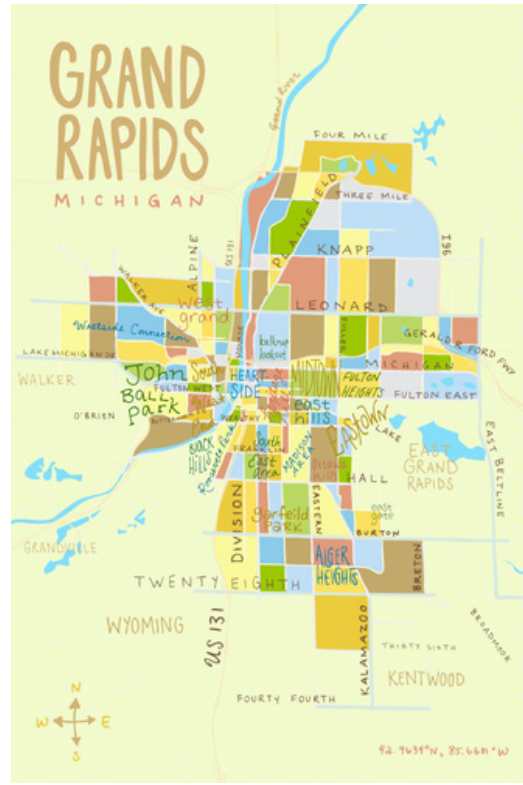
The Setting

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Grand Rapids is a city that sits along the Grand River and is 25 miles east of Lake Michigan. It is the second most populated city in Michigan after Detroit. As of the 2020 census, the city had a population of 198,893. Grand Rapids is primarily white, with 57% of the population being Caucasian, 20% being Black and 14% being Hispanic. Grand Rapids has a large art community, especially in the art of making furniture. In the early 19th century, Grand Rapids was called "Furniture City"

Fun Fact!

Playwright Noah Haidle is originally from Grand Rapids



Discussion Questions



- If you wrote a play set in your hometown what would it be about?
- What parts of your hometown would you include in the play?

Ernestine's Trip Abroad

In the play, Ernestine recounts a trip she took to explore the world. Some of her destinations include....

St. Germain, Paris, France



[Click here to read about 20 Great Things About St. Germain](#)

The Base of Mount Everest



[Watch a video about what its like to climb Mt. Everest](#)

Buenos Aires, Argentina



[Watch a video about the capital of Argentina](#)

Discussion Questions



Imagine you are planning a trip around the world....

- What would your top three destinations be and why?
- Would you like to visit any of the places Ernestine visited on her big trip?
- Who would you like to explore the world with?

Themes of the Play

BIRTHDAYS

Over the course of the play time jumps again and again, always to Ernestine's birthday. Throughout the play Ernestine ages from age 17 to 107.

Fun Fact!

The oldest person to ever live was Jeanne Louise Calment who lived to be 122 years and 164 days old



History of Birthdays



Today we typically associate birthdays with the singing of happy birthday, cake, candles, parties, and presents - but these traditions are still relatively new.

The shift to birthday celebrations being common practice happened in the 19th century as individualism grew in Western culture. Before that birthday celebrations were reserved for rulers or powerful members of the upper class. For instance Americans would celebrate George Washington's birthday, but might have not even known when their own was.

At this time families began having less children and kids went from being workers to being more cherished members of the family unit, with a birthday being the perfect opportunity to show kids affection.

The shift to celebrating birthdays coincided with Americans becoming more aware of their own age and age itself growing in significance. Clocks became available to have in homes leading to an increased sense of time awareness, and therefore people more commonly knowing their own birthday. Children started being put into grades by age, doctors assessed health by age, and personal milestones were measured in connection to age.



[Click to read more about the history of birthday celebrations](#)

Birthday Cake Recipe

BUTTER CAKE

Ingredients:

1 cup white sugar
½ cup butter
2 eggs, 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
1 ½ cups all-purpose flour, 1 ¾ teaspoons baking powder, ½ cup milk



Directions:

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour a 9x9 pan. Cream together sugar and butter. Beat in the eggs, one at a time, then stir in the vanilla. Combine flour and baking powder, add to the creamed mixture. Stir in the milk until the batter is smooth. Spoon batter into the pan. Bake for 30 minutes, when it springs to the touch, we're done.



BONUS!

[Watch a tutorial on how to make your own real Butter Cake](#)

Happy Birthday Song

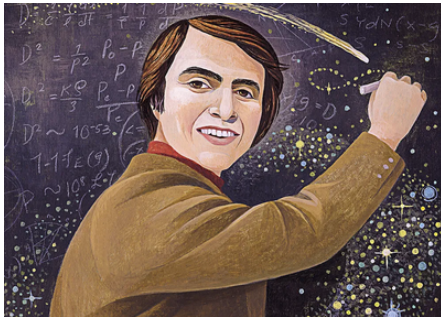
"Happy Birthday to You" was written by two sisters who were teachers, Mildred and Patty Hill, in 1893. The lyrics were originally, "Good Morning to All" and was used as a classroom greeting for their Kindergarten students.

Despite its popularity and being over 100 years old, the song was under copyright until 2016. It was originally going to be copyrighted till 2030 until a judge overturned it. This is why movies, tv-shows, and chain restaurants do not feature the song.



Themes of the Play

"If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch you must first invent the universe"



- Carl Sagan

To write *Birthday Candles* playwright Noah Haidle took inspiration from a variety of places. He chooses to start his script with the above quote from Carl Sagan, a famous American astronomer.



Discussion Questions



- What do you think Carl Sagan meant by this statement?
- Why do you think Noah Haidle chose to put the quote in the script?



BONUS!

[Watch a clip from Carl Sagan's show Cosmos](#)



Key Term

ATMAN

Atman is a Sanskrit word for self or breath. In Hinduism it is an individual's soul. Atman is the core and true of a person that lives within them. The belief in Hinduism is that after someone passes away the atman will transmute to a new life or attain release, making it an eternal force.

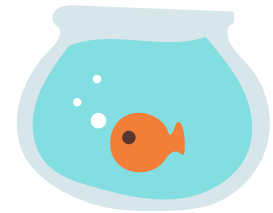


[Read the full interview with Noah Haidle here](#)

1. "When I was 19, I read that goldfish have a three second memory span"

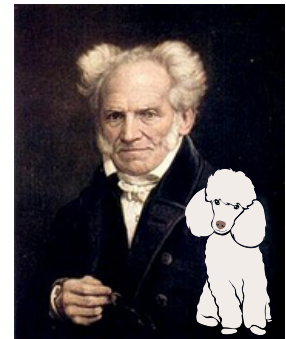
Fun Fact!

This is an urban legend, goldfish can have significantly longer memories. See how the myth was debunked [here](#).



2. "Arthur Schopenhauer spent the last years of his life alone in Frankfurt, Germany playing the violin to his dog Atman (the name of the goldfish in *Birthday Candles*)"

Arthur Schopenhauer was a 19th century German philosopher who contended the universe is not a rational place. Schopenhauer named all his dogs Atman like Ernestine in the play with her goldfish.



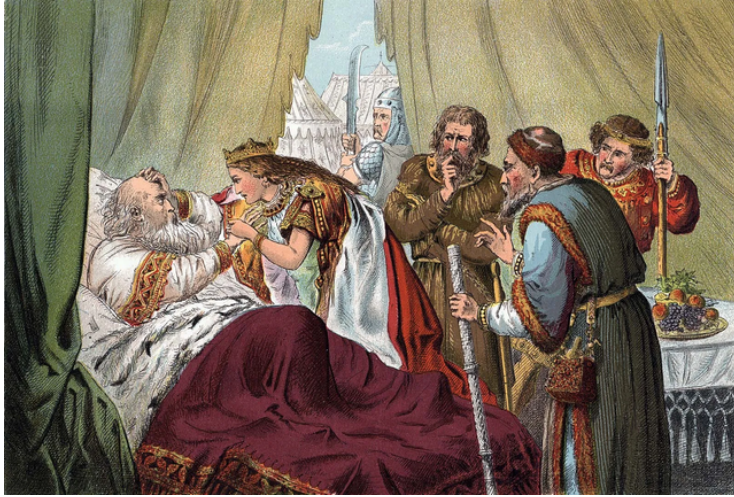
3. "Thornton Wilder's *A Long Christmas Dinner*. I straight up stole the conceit of that play and used it for *Birthday Candles*, dropping in on certain birthdays of a woman from age 17 to 107 as Mr. Wilder's play drops in on certain Christmases in the life of a family. Through another bit of good luck, the heads of Wilder's estate, Rosey Strub and Tappan Wilder, read *Birthday Candles* and gave it their blessing. As T.S. Eliot wrote, minor poets borrow, major poets steal.

It is difficult to find happiness within oneself, but it is impossible to find it anywhere else.

- Arthur Schopenhauer



Themes of the Play



King Lear

The play begins with a teenage Ernestine practicing for auditions for the school play, Shakespeare's King Lear - a feminist interpretation starring Queen Lear.

The play is a tragedy about an elderly King attempting to divide his land and power between his daughters.

Many people working in theatre first gained their interest as a young person in school like Ernestine

Big Ideas in Birthday Candles



Growing Up

The play explores adolescence through late life and the desire to find a place and purpose in the universe



Grief

Characters in the play experience loss in a variety of ways. Read more about the process and stages of grief [here](#).



Family

Ernestine's story shows 5 generations of her family and how they rely on one another. Intergenerational family households are on the rise.



Traditions

Throughout the play we witness familial traditions. "Family traditions enhance family and personal well-being and can also add to the family identity. Strong family bonds are created and reinforced with traditions that are upheld and maintained."

TIP FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

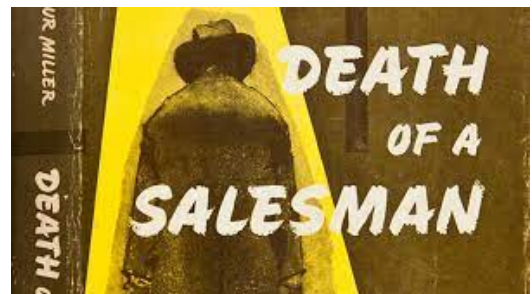


"I read Death of a Salesman in my junior year and said, 'I'm totally gonna do that.' Having no idea how one becomes a playwright, I decided to go to the public library and to read everything. I read at least one play a day for years, operating under the theory that if I took on enough information, someday I'd be able to synthesize something myself."



BONUS!

[Watch an interview with Noah Haidle on the importance of live theatre](#)



Discussion Questions



In the play, characters connect through family traditions while navigating life's hardships.

- What family traditions have you experienced through challenging times? How did the traditions help you get through it?
- Which of your community's traditions do you wish to continue and why?

Activities

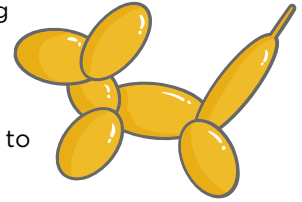
Pet for Life

In the play Ernestine receives a goldfish for her birthday named Atman, as the goldfish passes away and she gets new ones she continues to name the goldfish Atman the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and so on.



Imagine you are getting someone a pet for their birthday and you are responsible for naming it. Decide who you are gifting to, what kind of pet you would give them, and what name it would have and why. The name you choose must:

- Be in a foreign language
- Have significance to you and the person you are gifting it to
- Be worthy of being used for the 2nd, 3rd, 4th pet



Age Swap Improv

Test your acting abilities by becoming characters at surprise ages throughout their life

1. Each student writes a random age down on a slip of paper and places them all in a bowl
2. Each student writes a well known character or celebrity on a slip of paper and places them all in a separate bowl. (For an extra challenge write down significant figures you are currently studying)
3. One student takes a slip of paper from each bowl and then becomes that person at that age.
4. The rest of the class must try to guess what person they are and what age they are depicting.

BONUS!

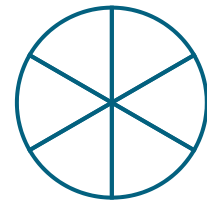
Have multiple students go up to act at once and interact with one another like they are at a birthday party. See how the characters interact and challenge students to play out a full scene.

Teacher Note: If students are feeling stuck about what to say, turn the game into an interview and have students ask them questions to help the group gauge who they are and what age they are.

Memory Cake

Create a paper cake honoring memories from past birthdays!

1. Draw a large circle on a piece of paper and cut it out
2. Decorate one side of the circle to become a cake you would love to take a bite of. You can draw frosting, sprinkles, writing, and candles to make it your own.
3. Flip the circle and on the other side draw four lines across the circle, breaking it up into slices of cake.
4. On each slice write a memory from either your birthday or a friend or family member's birthday that had an impact on you.



If you have a hard time thinking of memories, try and answer these prompts:

- What is your funniest birthday memory?
- What was your loneliest birthday?
- Was there a "perfect" birthday memory you remember, even if it wasn't perfect?

5. Cut out your slices of cake so you can share them with your Birthday Memory Party.
6. Break into small groups and share your slices of cake.

Discuss the following at Birthday Memory Party:

- Why did you choose the memories you did?
- What do birthdays mean to you?
- What birthday traditions do you celebrate?



Resources

[Northlight Theatre Artistic Bios](#)

[Synopsis of Birthday Candles](#)

[Star Studio Noah Haidle discusses Roundabout play “Birthday Candles”](#)

[Notre Dame The Observer Sitting Down with Samuel B. Jackson, '20](#)

[Chicago Tribune - Chicago actress Kate Fry shares ‘what I have come to know about trying to be happy](#)

[The Atlantic - The Strange History of Birthday Celebrations](#)

[20 Great Things About St. Germain](#)

[What It’s Actually Like To Climb Mount Everest](#)

[Buenos Aires, Argentina’s MEGACITY: Europe of the Americas](#)

[How to Make the BEST Butter Cake](#)

[CBS News - “Happy Birthday” song officially recognized in public domain](#)

[Copyright and the World’s Most Popular Song by Robert Brauneis](#)

[The Atlantic - How Chain Restaurants Sing ‘Happy Birthday’: An Elegy](#)

[National Geographic - The epic history of the humble goldfish](#)

[BIRTHDAY CANDLES Playwright Noah Haidle on the importance of live theatre](#)

[New York Times - Birthday Candles Review](#)

[Playwright Noah Haidle blows out his ‘Birthday Candles’ by Mark Kennedy](#)

[Smithsonian Magazine - Why Carl Sagan is Truly Irreplaceable](#)

[BBC - The nature of human life in Hinduism](#)

[Britannica - Atman](#)

[Grand Rapids, MI - Census](#)

[Census Reporter Grand Rapids, MI](#)

[Roundabout Theatre Company Upstage Guide](#)

[John Hopkins Medicine - Grief and Loss](#)

[Four generations under one roof: Families living together on the rise](#)

[The Importance of Family Traditions](#)

[Carl Sagan - Pale Blue Dot](#)

[Do Goldfish Really Have A 3-Second Memory?](#)