VISITING MR. GREEN

Study Guide

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I. THE PLAY

A. Synopsis

When the elderly Mr. Green, a retired dry-cleaner, wanders into the street one day and is nearly hit by a speeding car, the young man driving is sentenced to six months of community service. Ross Gardiner, a young corporate executive, is now obligated to help Mr. Green with his household chores once a week. This proves to be a difficult task; Mr. Green is stubborn, set in his ways and usually at odds with Ross. However, as Ross’ visits continue, Mr. Green becomes more open and friendly towards the young man, and the two men start to discover the startling amount they have in common. When a revelation startles Mr. Green back into his reactionary attitudes, it begins to seem that a friendship is impossible. But Mr. Green has a secret as well, and it quickly becomes apparent that neither man can come to terms with himself or his past without the support of the other. Jeff Baron’s poignant comedy tells the story of a friendship that changes both men by challenging their opinions in nearly every arena. What emerges from their struggle is a heartfelt play that appeals to the intelligence of all generations.

B. Setting and Characters

*The Setting:* The action of the play takes place entirely within Mr. Green’s apartment in the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The time is the late 1990s.

*The Characters:* Only two characters are active in the play, but they create a specific and intricate picture of contemporary attitudes.

Ross Gardiner: A 29-year-old American Express executive quickly working his way up the corporate ladder. At the time of the accident, he is outwardly successful but inwardly unhappy. He is lonely, ostracized from his family, and paralyzed by doubts and fears. Ross harbors a secret from Mr. Green that he realizes will jeopardize his friendship with the older, devoutly Jewish man. He is forced to make the choice to continue to lie to himself and others or to reveal his secret and risk losing his newfound, and only, friend.

Mr. Green: An 86-year-old retired dry cleaner. Mr. Green is a widower, married fifty-nine years and now living alone in his apartment, dealing with his loneliness at his wife’s death and the advance of age. Mr. Green is Jewish and his religion is the cornerstone of his life; when someone contradicts his strict faith he doesn’t yield his ground. Ross challenges him in this respect, only to find out that Mr. Green’s faith has been challenged before.
C. About the Playwright

VISITING MR. GREEN was Jeff Baron’s first play and has earned international recognition, having been translated into 20 different languages and receiving Best Play awards in the United States (by the Drama League), as well as in Israel, Greece, Germany, and Turkey. It was also a best play nominee for the prestigious Molière Award in France. Mr. Baron’s works VISITING MR. GREEN and MOTHER’S DAY were also the recipients of the Kulturpreis Europa 2001, making Baron the first American and the first playwright to be awarded this honor.

Other works by Mr. Baron include MR. & MRS. G, EDNA AND JOE FOREVER, BLESS ME, FATHER, GIVE ‘EM AN INCH, and a one-act opera called SONG OF MARTINA performed at Carnegie Hall. Mr. Baron has also written several screenplays of which THE BRUCE DIET won the CINE Golden Eagle Award and his poetry and fiction writing have also been published in New York Magazine, The Dallas Times-Herald, and the New York Daily News, as well as in Toronto and Paris.

D. Production History

VISITING MR. GREEN was first performed by the Berkshire Theatre Festival (Arthur Storch, Artistic Director, Kate Maguire, Producing Director) in Stockbridge, Massachusetts on June 20, 1996. It was directed by John Rando; the set design was by Patrick Fahey; the lighting design was by Phil Monat; the costume design was by Murell Horton; the sound design was by James Wildman; and the stage manager was Karen A. Potosnak. The cast, in order of appearance, was as follows:

MR. GREEN_______________________________________________________________Eli Wallach
ROSS_______________________________________________________________Neal Huff

City Lights Theater Company’s production of VISITING MR. GREEN ran January 19 – February 19, 2006. It was directed by Jane Geesman. The set design was by Ron Gasparinetti; lighting design was by Brendan Bartholomew; costume design was by Jean McCaron; sound design was by Ian Nelson; and the stage manager was Robyn Winslow. The cast, in order of appearance, is as follows:

MR. GREEN_______________________________________________________________Ed Pliska
ROSS_______________________________________________________________Jeff Clarke
E. Historical Context

Jewish Cultural References

Although VISITING MR. GREEN is a contemporary play, both of its characters have roots in Jewish culture, tradition, and language. References to Jewish culture appear throughout the play. These references are explained below in the order in which they occur in VISITING MR. GREEN to help facilitate a complete understanding of the play.

**Yiddish:** the chief vernacular (spoken) language of the Ashkanazic Jews of Eastern and Central Europe. Yiddish is written in Hebrew characters but the language is Germanic in origin. Originally an adaptation of Middle High German dialects to special Jewish needs, contemporary Yiddish vocabulary is comprised of about 85% German, 10% Hebrew, and 5% Slavic, with traces of Romanian, French, and other elements.

**Kosher:** The Jewish set of dietary regulations derived from passages in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which limit the consumption of meat to ruminant (cud-chewing) animals with cloven hooves. Pork and all hog products are considered unfit and shellfish is traditionally avoided. All acceptable animals are killed according to the rabbinical ritual, and meat and dairy and not consumed together.

**Traif:** The Yiddish word for un-kosher food.

**Shabbos:** The weekly days of rest in Judaism, observed from before sundown on Friday until after nightfall on Saturday.

**Bris:** A religious ceremony that welcomes infant boys into a covenant between God and the Children of Israel through ritual circumcision.

**Bar Mitzvah:** At the age of 13 a boy becomes Bar Mitzvah under Jewish law, meaning he is now privileged to participate in all areas of Jewish community life and bear his own responsibility for Jewish ritual law, tradition, and ethics. The female equivalent is Bat Mitzvah, which falls at the age of 12 or 13.

**Milchick:** Of, or related to, Kosher dairy foods.

**Flayshick:** Of, or related to, Kosher meats.

**Pesach/Passover:** A holiday commemorating the Exodus and freedom of the Israelites from Ancient Egypt. The three main traditions of Passover are the eating of matzoh (unleavened bread,) the prohibition of leavened foods, and the retelling of the Exodus through a communal ritual called the seder.

**Mazeltov:** Yiddish word meaning “good luck.”

**Shiva:** A 7 day period of grief and mourning for a first-degree relative (parent, child, sibling, or spouse.)

**Torah:** Primarily refers to the first section of the Tanakh, but the term is sometimes used to encompass the entire written and oral law of Judaism.

**Goy/Goyim:** Generally, though not exclusively, used to refer to non-Jews. While it is usually a neutral term it can, in certain contexts, be pejorative.

**Dahvening:** Yiddish term for praying. Jewish men are required to pray three times daily, and four times daily on Shabbos and Jewish holidays.

**Mein Shayna Maydeleh:** Yiddish phrase meaning “my beautiful little girl.”
Locations, Past and Present

*VISITING MR. GREEN* is a contemporary play set in New York, but a great deal of importance is put on the past. Understanding both where Mr. Green and Ross’ families come from, as well as where they are now, is important to comprehending the greater context of the play.

**Kishinev**

Mr. Green’s parents came from Kishinev (Chisinau), which is now the capital city of the Republic of Moldova. In the 18th Century, Kishinev was a center of Jewish culture and industry. By the turn of the 20th century, it was home to Jewish-owned factories, over a dozen Jewish schools and 70 synagogues.

On Easter Day in 1903, a pogrom left 49 Jews dead from mob frenzy. Hundreds were injured and thousands left homeless. In 1905, 19 Jews were killed in a second pogrom. The Jewish community was shaken and a flood of emigration began. Mr. Green’s parents probably immigrated to the United States around this time.

**Pinsk**

Ross’ grandparents came from Pinsk, which is now in Belarus. A Jewish community was founded in Pinsk in 1506 and prospered over several centuries of relative peace until the Polish occupation of World War One, when 35 Jewish community leaders were executed without trial on the accusation that they were Bolsheviks. This atrocity was followed by years of culturally oppressive Russian occupation and many Jews were exiled, but they still comprised 75% of the population of Pinsk prior to World War Two.

Pinsk became the first large city in Nazi-occupied territories whose Jewish population was completely annihilated. German occupation began in 1941 and at least 11,000 Jews, mostly men, were murdered almost immediately. The rest were forced into a crowded Jewish ghetto only to be murdered late in 1942. Although it is more difficult to discern, Ross’ grandparents probably emigrated from Pinsk in the interim between World Wars or during World War Two.

**The Upper West Side of Manhattan**

The Upper West Side is a distinct section of New York City, bounded on the South by 59th Street, the east by Central Park, the west by the Hudson River, and the north by 123rd St. It contains the neighborhoods of Lincoln Square, Ansonia, and Morningside Heights. The Upper West Side is home to a large and active Jewish community. It boasts several synagogues, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and is the *de facto* center of the modern Orthodox Jewish Singles Community.
II. THE PRODUCTION

A. Style and Concept

Author’s Notes

*VISITING MR. GREEN* is intended to mirror real life. In the Author’s Note included in the Dramatists Play Service edition, the playwright Jeff Baron states:

> “I wrote this play to be realistic, avoiding jokes or fancy speeches that might make me look talented, but would distract the audience from these two men and their story…

> “In certain moments, I dance close to the edge of sentimentality in this play. If those moments are played in a sentimental way, they’ll come across as sappy and obvious rather than sweet and touching. Similarly, there are moments when the characters are very angry. Avoid turning these into shouting matches and door slamming contests, again, in the interest of keeping the audience believing.

> “The humor in the play is meant to come from the characters’ personalities. It’s funny because people are funny (as opposed to because the writer is funny or the actors are funny.)”

Set Design

The following are notes from City Lights resident set designer Ron Gasparinetti on the realistic feel of the setting in contrast with the styles of other City Lights productions.

> "*VISITING MR. GREEN* is my first truly realistic interior set designed for City Lights Theatre Company. One will see real walls, real doors and windows, accurate detailing, decoration and architecture. *PROOF* (Sept.-Oct. 2006) which at first glance seemed to be realistic, was in fact a façade, and an incomplete one at that. It mimicked what was portrayed by the actors. The trappings of a house were not necessary for *WISE WOMEN* (Nov.-Dec. 2006) to be presented. It is quite clear through actor dialogue where the show is placed. *VISITING MR. GREEN* is a real story about an incident that really has happened somewhere and will happen again. Cool backgrounds, atmospheric settings, or broken facades would trivialize the whole meaning of the show and what is being said onstage. It needs all the trappings of a realistic apartment in New York. To do otherwise would only serve to confuse the audience. To do otherwise would leave the show ungrounded, unanchored and not in a real place at a real time.”
B. The Director at Work

Jane Bement Geesman directed the City Lights production of VISITING MR. GREEN in her City Lights directorial debut. She shares these insights into the production process:

Q: What are the limitations and/or advantages of directing a two-character play?
In my opinion, two-character plays are a director’s dream. I always love working in an up-close-and-personal manner with actors, digging into the emotional life of their characters, fine-tuning the subtle nuances of the story being told. This process is just plain easier and more focused when dealing with only two actors. There’s an intimacy that is fostered with these smaller, character-driven plays, and that intimacy is crucial to the integrity of the play. Just as Mr. Green and Ross develop a relationship in VISITING MR. GREEN, so did the actors, Ed Pliska and Jeff Clarke, and that connection enhances the audience’s experience.

Q: This is an intergenerational story; to what audiences do you think this play speaks and why?
Yes, this is an intergenerational play – and I think its story speaks to anyone who has experienced the heartbreak and joy of being in relationship with another human being. Mr. Green and Ross are thrown together by circumstance, and despite huge obstacles (not the least of which is their own resistance), they create a bond of friendship that’s as heartwarming as it is unlikely. I think audiences of all ages and backgrounds will resonate with the themes of VISITING MR. GREEN – relationship, family, faith, and redemption.

Q: VISITING MR. GREEN tackles some tough contemporary issues. It is also a tightly woven character piece. Do you believe one of these aspects takes precedence over the other in the play, or are they both equally important?
VISITING MR. GREEN does indeed tackle issues that are familiar to all of us and does so via the relationship between Mr. Green and Ross. Such very different men from such different backgrounds! The setting is ripe for strong debate (and great humor) about religion, family, and sexuality. What I think transcends all the more “political” issues is the love that develops between the two men – a love that opens doorways to great possibilities.

Q: What is your favorite part of the directing process?
I love the rehearsal process, plain and simple. Reading the script for the first time, casting the show, digging into the story and bringing it to life – wonderful! Working with actors in such a personal, creative way is so rewarding for me. I know what hard work stage-acting is, how challenging it is to bring oneself forward and fill the character’s shoes with honesty and fullness. It’s such an honor to work with actors who want to challenge themselves by digging a little deeper to find more layers of emotional life – hence, fuller-bodied characters. And frankly, the entire rehearsal process, working with the actors and the designers, is just plain fun – which is an all-important ingredient in any creative endeavor.
C. An Actor at Work

Jeff Clarke portrayed Ross Gardiner in the City Lights production of VISITING MR. GREEN and offered the following insights:

Q: How does the two-character cast size affect your experience of the play?
A two person play is a very unique acting experience, in that it is much more intimate for both audience and actors. When only two people are tasked with telling a story, they must have more energy, stamina, and presence of mind than in an ensemble piece with several actors. We are also limited in having only one other person to play off of, and only each other to rely on. You have to be much more trusting in a two person show.

Q: Many of the events that inform the play are only discussed on stage; they have taken place in the past. Does this present an acting challenge? If so, how do you approach it?
All plays make reference to events that the audience never sees. As an actor, you have to recreate these happenings in your head, in a way that bridges stage action with talked about events. Sometimes many characters have experience the same "off stage" experience, but that doesn't mean all the actors have to be in agreement as far as the details are concerned. All the actor has to do is think about his or her characters reaction to them, and make sure that is consistent with the characters actions on stage.

Q: In what ways are you most like your character? In what ways are you least like your character?
I am most like Ross in that I'm a caring individual, but that can be hidden behind a smart-aleck facade. I also consider myself fairly open-minded and progressive. I'm least like Ross in that I could never work as a business executive. That, and who actually drives in New York City?!

Q: What is your favorite part of the rehearsal process?
My favorite part of the rehearsal process is being part of a creative experience that can never be duplicated. You have your ups and downs in every show you work on, but the creative spark of individual cast and crew members, the ensemble energy you can only create with that specific group of people, and the mounting of a production that belongs to you is something no other art form can provide. Night to night, the show is different, if only just a little. That is the best part of live theatre.
III. FOR DISCUSSION

A. What to Look for as You Watch the Play

1. Consider the small cast of the play. Does it cast create an intimacy in which you are able to understand each character better? Would the presence of any of the other characters mentioned in the play enhanced the story or detracted from its focus?

2. Which moments in the play are memorable to you? Which ones pulled you in because of their comedic tone, and which ones drew you because of their drama?

3. Consider the setting of the play. How does Mr. Green’s apartment illustrate his character? How do the changes that Ross brings to Mr. Green’s apartment reflect on the changes that Mr. Green experiences as he grows closer to Ross?

4. How do the design elements (set, lighting, costume, props and sound) contribute to your understanding of the play? What other choices could have been made for the design of the show, and how would that have made the experience different?
B. Quiz

1. Who is Mrs. Fanelli?
2. What is Ross’ punishment for reckless driving?
3. Why can’t Ross call Mrs. Fanelli?
4. Why doesn’t Mr. Green want to eat the food Ross brought for him?
5. Who was Yetta?
6. How old is Mr. Green?
7. Why doesn’t Mr. Green want to see a doctor?
8. How does Ross know that Jewish people aren’t allowed to commit suicide?
9. Why doesn’t Ross want to eat with Mr. Green when he’s invited?
10. How many sets of dishes does Mr. Green have?
11. Where are Mr. Green’s parents from?
12. What was Mr. Green’s business?
13. How did Mr. Green meet his wife?
14. What is Ross’ business?
15. Who is Paul?
16. How did Ross’ parents deal with the news that he is gay?
17. Who is Rachel?
18. Why doesn’t Mr. Green speak to Rachel?
19. What does Ross find in Mr. Green’s mail?
20. What is the name of Mr. Green’s granddaughter? What is its significance?
C. Quiz Answers

1. Who is Mrs. Fanelli? Ross’ social worker.
2. What is Ross’ punishment for reckless driving? Six months of community service consisting of visiting Mr. Green once a week.
3. Why can’t Ross call Mrs. Fanelli? Mr. Green’s phone is disconnected.
4. Why doesn’t Mr. Green want to eat the food Ross brought for him? Mr. Green is afraid the food isn’t kosher.
5. Who was Yetta? Mr. Green’s wife.
6. How old is Mr. Green? Eighty-six years old.
7. Why doesn’t Mr. Green want to see a doctor? Yetta saw a doctor after she suffered a heart attack.
8. How does Ross know that Jewish people aren’t allowed to commit suicide? Ross is Jewish; he learned this information in Hebrew school.
9. Why doesn’t Ross want to eat with Mr. Green when he’s invited? Ross is in training for a marathon.
10. How many sets of dishes does Mr. Green have? Four sets of dishes: milchick (dairy), flayschick (meat), and milchick and flayschick dishes for Pesach (Passover).
11. Where are Mr. Green’s parents from? Kishinev, in Russia.
12. What was Mr. Green’s business? Mr. Green ran a dry cleaning business.
13. How did Mr. Green meet his wife? Waiting in line for the toilet.
15. Who is Paul? The man with whom Ross fell in love.
16. How did Ross’ parents deal with the news that he is gay? His mother pretended nothing had changed; his father stopped speaking to him.
17. Who is Rachel? Mr. Green’s daughter.
18. Why doesn’t Mr. Green speak to Rachel? She married outside the Jewish faith.
19. What does Ross find in Mr. Green’s mail? Letters from Rachel to Yetta.
20. What is the name of Mr. Green’s granddaughter? What is its significance? Mr. Green’s granddaughter is named Hannah, which was the name of Mr. Green’s mother.
D. Study Questions

1. What is the message of *VISITING MR. GREEN*? How do the subjects of religion, culture, and the age gap contribute to the overall theme or message of the play?

2. How are Mr. Green and Ross’ Jewish heritage and their perceptions of that heritage significant in the play? Do the cultural references add to or take away from your understanding of the play’s message?

3. Do you find yourself relating to one of the characters as opposed to the other? Why or why not?
E. Further Reading


