A Study Guide
by Nathan Jones

THE 

Foreigner

By Larry Shue
Directed by Geoffrey Kent

OCTOBER 13 - NOVEMBER 18, 2017
BLACK BOX THEATRE
**Synopsis**

*(or, How It All Goes Down)*

The door to Betty Meeks’ fishing lodge in Tilghman County, Georgia swings open and two Englishmen enter. Froggy LeSeur teaches demolitions to the army and has brought his shy friend Charlie. Charlie is painfully shy and morose as well. It seems that his wife is dying. Froggy cheerfully brings him along in an effort to lift his spirits.

Charlie confides in Froggy, admitting that his wife is likely cheating on him because he’s such a boring husband. He is terrified to be left alone at the lodge while his friend works because he might have to talk to people. Froggy assures him that he will think of something.

Betty Meeks, the owner of the lodge informs Froggy that she is in danger of losing her business to the county inspector, Owen Musser, who threatens to condemn the building. If she is forced to sell it, the wealthy heiress Catherine Simms plans to buy it with her fiancée, Reverend David Marshall Lee. They currently live at the lodge as Betty’s guests, accompanied by Catherine’s dim-witted brother, Ellard.

Froggy concocts a wild scheme so that Charlie won’t have to talk to people. He tells Betty that Charlie is a “foreigner” who can’t speak or comprehend English. Betty is intrigued at the prospect of learning about someone from a foreign country. Charlie is terrified that he’ll be found out and begs Froggy to call it off. Catherine and David enter arguing about the problems in their relationship. They think Charlie is eavesdropping until Betty rushes in and explains that he doesn’t understand what they’re saying. Charlie is trapped in the lie.

Owen Musser enters mean-spirited and cross. Ignoring the “foreigner” he engages in conversation with David Lee, and Charlie overhears their plan to buy the lodge with Catherine’s inheritance at a bargain price so they can turn it into the headquarters for their “good Christian hunt club.” The catch is that they need to make sure Ellard doesn’t get any of the inheritance. Their plan is make him look stupid so that Catherine must act as his caretaker.

The next morning Ellard joins Charlie at the breakfast table and offers to teach him some English. Charlie begins to relax and starts having fun with the guests. He does ridiculous gestures that Betty interprets for everyone and he sits and listens to Catherine's troubles as well. When Ellard impresses them with all the English he “taught” Charlie, everyone agrees that the presence of a “foreigner” has rejuvenated their spirits.

Two days later Charlie and Ellard return from the courthouse where they have been watching workers lay bricks. Ellard plans to fix the structural problems with the lodge once he’s mastered bricklaying. Froggy returns and is shocked by how well Charlie is doing. Charlie admits to Froggy that he might be acquiring a personality.

Catherine announces that she will split the inheritance with Ellard. David and Owen are less than pleased. Everyone sits down for a lesson on Charlie’s language and culture. He makes Owen and David look foolish. Owen stands up, pulls a knife on Charlie and threatens everyone with violence before storming out. David rushes after him. As everyone begins to worry about Owen’s threats, they all look to Charlie for a plan.
Character Relationships
(or, Who's Who and What They're Up To)

Sgt. Froggy LeSeur
A clever and positive British demolitions expert

Betty Meeks
Widowed proprietor of the fishing lodge. Well meaning and welcoming

Owen Musser
The county property inspector and lackey to the Reverend

Charlie Baker
The shy and dull "foreigner" with hidden potential

Ellard Simms
Catherine's curious and less than brilliant brother

Rev. David Lee
Catherine's charming fiancée who is Lee in more than name

Catherine Simms
Bored ex-debutante with a sizable inheritance

Friends

Tries to help

Critical of

Takes the lead from

Lodges with

Gives confidence to

Siblings

Engaged
Larry Shue was a young, up and coming playwright who had just begun to make his mark when he died in a plane crash at the age of 39. He was a gifted comedic writer and had just begun to find success when he wrote *The Foreigner*. Shue was born in New Orleans, Louisiana and spent time growing up in Kansas and Illinois. At the age of ten he already had a profound interest in plays. He would write his own plays in the family garage and charge the neighborhood kids a penny for admission. He got his B.F.A. at Illinois Wesleyan and though he wrote two plays while he was there, he focused primarily on becoming an actor. During the Vietnam War he served in the Entertainment Division and upon leaving, won several acting awards in the Atlanta and D.C. area. A big shift in his career came when he joined Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in 1977.

He was made Playwright in Residence after he wrote the one-act “Grandma Duck is Dead” in 1979. He wrote three plays in four years: *The Nerd* (1981), *The Foreigner* (1983), and *Wenceslas Square* (1984). After that, Shue’s star began to rise quickly. *The Nerd* had a successful run in London, while Disney hired him to write a screenplay for *The Foreigner* after it was hailed by audiences in New York. He was becoming a Renaissance man of sorts. He was hired to write the book for a musical version of *The Honeymooners*, acted for Berkeley Rep, appeared on the soap opera *One Life to Live*, and was preparing to make his Broadway debut in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

His climb to international fame was never realized when his small commuter plane crashed in the Shenandoah Valley in 1985. *The Foreigner* remains the most lasting and most often produced reminder of his brief legacy.

**Activities**

- Many critics agree that Larry Shue had not yet figured out how to write great comedy. Read *The Nerd* or *Wenceslas Square*. Do you agree with this assessment? How do you think his writing would have changed as he gained more experience? Do you think he would have written something that would be more popular than *The Foreigner* is today? Why or why not?
Context
(or, Why Should I Care?)

When The New Yorker reviewed Larry Shue’s The Foreigner, the writer noted that she found it “funny” but also “silly.” This sentiment sums up the critics’ opinions of Larry Shue’s work at the time, but audiences loved his funny, warm and very relatable characters.

Audiences at Milwaukee Repertory Theatre were familiar with Larry Shue’s work on and offstage. They welcomed his new play with uproarious laughter. When the play moved to its Off-Broadway venue in New York, audiences again, did not need convincing. When the boiler in the theatre broke down sending the audience out into freezing rain, they refused to leave until a temporary fix allowed them to see the second act. This success led the producers to shoot for a Broadway run.

But New York critics panned the play as being “shallow,” “unbelievable,” and “unintelligent trash.” It seemed that critics could not bring themselves to embrace this farce set in rural Georgia.

As soon as these reviews came out, audiences dried up and stopped coming as word of mouth stopped spreading. The show made $9,881 in the opening week, well below the $23,000 break-even point.

Somehow though, this play resonated with people deeply. The actors took pay cuts, distributed flyers, and got the buzz going again. Over 80,000 lapel buttons were made in an effort to save the show. But, the true saving grace was a Texas oil millionaire. He thought the show was incredible and bankrolled it until it could generate audiences on its own. It enjoyed a long run and was awarded and Outer Critics Circle Award for best Off-Broadway Play. To this day it remains one of the most produced plays in the United States and is considered one of the best plays in the regional theatre canon by the American Theatre Critics Association.

Activities

- Is there a difference between silly and funny? Why do you think critics look at some types of comedy as being “shallow” or “ridiculous”? Debate what counts as “comedy” in entertainment.
- The play is often called a farce, but there are some very serious themes in the play that are more like dark comedy. What makes dark comedy effective? Find an example of another play or film that uses farce and dark comedy together.
- How do you think this play would change if it were written in 2017? Are the problems and situations that the characters face still relevant today? Why or why not?
Themes
(or, What Are We Talking About?)

THE SEARCH FOR SELF – Charlie enters the play as a boring accountant whose wife sleeps around because she finds him so boring. By the end Charlie has completely changed our initial impression of him. Charlie lets others define his perception of himself, and he has no way to break out of it until he becomes “The Foreigner.” However, this universal theme does not stop at Charlie. Betty, Ellard, and Catherine are all trying to make sense of their purpose, while David and Owen conspire to hide their true selves from the others. Ellard believes that he is a half-wit until Charlie gives him the courage to explore what he can really do. Betty tries to make sense of her financial dilemma, and Charlie helps her regain some of the vitality and excitement she once had. Catherine must confront the crisis of being an unwed mother, violating the expectations of her wealthy family.

Questions
• Why do we so often need other people to show us the way to our true self?
• Has there been a time when you struggled to identify who you really were? If you have, do you think it will stay that way or change with age?
• Which character has the greatest identify crisis to overcome? Whom do you empathize with in the play as he or she struggles in the search for personal identity?

PREJUDICE – Although it is a comedy, The Foreigner deals with the theme of prejudice. Owen immediately becomes suspicious and hateful toward Charlie because he is a foreigner. The character of Owen references his time in Vietnam, where racism toward the Vietnamese was rampant. He mentions that the last foreigner he saw “was wrigglin’ on the end o’ my bayonet.” This is a moment where the darkness Owen feels toward Charlie and anyone different rears its head.

Questions
• Why do you think Owen is so afraid of Charlie? Why does he react to him the way he does?
• How do others in the play work to overcome Charlie’s differences? How does this leave Owen and David feeling as the play progresses?
• If hatred is fear, what do people like David and Owen fear so badly?

TOLERANCE – On the flipside of all of the prejudice, many of the characters exhibit a great deal of tolerance. Betty and Catherine are enamored by their visitor and become more and more interested in his customs and language. The allure of someone new from a different place intrigues Ellard, and he can’t help but engage with his silent tablemate. Before long, they are all laughing, telling stories, learning new words, and finding something meaningful in the connection that they feel with someone they can’t always communicate perfectly with. Along with the fun, they become stronger as they embrace something new.

Questions
• Betty holds Ellard to a higher standard than Charlie at the dinner table. Why?
• Why does everyone gravitate to Charlie once they find out he is foreign? Do they do so for different reasons based on their characters?
• What do you think the challenges of this play are when communicating silently or in a made up language? What do you think helps the actors give it meaning?

FARCE – The Foreigner uses farce as a vehicle to create lots of laughter for the audience but also highlight the absurdity in the situation. Many of the actions in the play are heightened and over the top, but farce strives to strip away walls and embrace a more raw, communicative, and joyful truth about humanity.

Questions
• How does Larry Shue highlight positive aspects of human nature with farce? How about negative? Is one more effective than the other?
• How would this play be different if it was written as a drama or truly dark comedy? Would it impact people in different ways?
Director's Notes - Q&A

In your opinion, what keeps this play relevant after more than 30 years?

I find The Foreigner shockingly relevant to today, and I am a huge fan of using comedy to ask questions. Shue has written a timeless comedy that addresses bullying, immigration, surprise love and a victory for our band of oddballs as they face hatred. It warms my heart, makes my cry with laughter, and reminds us of the value of... well, everyone.

What aspect of the show excites you most as a director?

One of my favorite actors, Sammie Joe Kinnett, is playing our title role. He is a gifted physical comedian but also possesses great vulnerability onstage. I cannot wait to wade into this play with him at the helm of the ensemble. And I suspect we will spend a decent amount of time rolling on the floor laughing.

How do you approach a farce that has such dark undertones?

The first trick is to create real characters, not caricature. If the play is to have the necessary stakes for the comedy to thrive, we also need to have real danger with real people. And, since this cast has such great comic chops, we can make early passes at the play concentrating on story before we get mired in the mathematical process of setting bits. Comedy is hard, so it’s nice to take our time getting to the humor as rehearsals progress.

What are the advantages and challenges of doing a show with so much physical comedy and a character that speaks very little?

It is really about casting the right clown, and I believe we have achieved that with Sammie Joe. In addition, some comedy rests in the twinkle of the eyes and the tilt of the head. Also audience focus is key and in a thrust theatre (with audience on three sides) it is an even bigger challenge. Directing their eye to the moment and making sure all the actors onstage know they are part of every joke whether they have the punchline or not is essential. Finely crafted humor is decidedly a team effort.

In what ways do you want this production to be unique? What do you want to highlight for audiences?

Hopefully, with each play we approach in the rep, we are concentrating on telling a great story that our audience can understand, appreciate and contemplate after. I find our actor driven pre and post show discussions to be unique and ideally helpful in illuminating the play. Our play treads on ground that we are still surviving today. So if there is a goal beyond what is stated above, it is to open hearts and minds to our unlikely pack of protagonists with laughter. This is simply a terrific comedy.

–Geoffrey Kent

Activities

- Research what life was like in rural Georgia in the 1980’s. How is it similar or different from our time today?
- Read or see another play that is a farce. How are they similar or different from The Foreigner?
- Read Charlie's storytelling scene. Write in English what you think he might be saying.
- The play is written to reflect the speaking patterns and dialects of Georgia in the 1980’s. Rewrite a short scene to reflect the speech patterns and slang of today.
- Choose a character in the play. Write a letter from his or her perspective to the person in the play that he or she cares most about. What would she say if she were being completely honest?
- Write a personal journal entry from the perspective of a character. What are his or her deepest secrets and fears that can’t be shared with anyone else?