A Study Guide
by Nathan Jones

By Kate Hamill
Based on the novel by Jane Austen
Directed by Lynne Collins

JANUARY 26 - MAY 6, 2018
BLACK BOX THEATRE
Synopsis
(or, How It All Goes Down)

Upon the death of Mr. Dashwood, his wife and her the three daughters, Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret, are left penniless because women are not allowed to inherit property. Their half-brother, John, and his greedy wife, Fanny, decide to give them nothing, so they are forced to move from their estate to a cousin's cottage. The practical and sensible Elinor has fallen in love with Fanny's brother, Edward Ferrars. They are both cautious with their feelings, which drives the passionate Marianne crazy. What is the point of love if not to feel every wonderful, blissful moment? The family moves, leaving the budding romance behind.

Their cousin, Sir John Middleton, welcomes them to the cottage on his grand estate, and he and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings, immediately begin cooking up ways to get the two sisters married off to proper gentlemen. The sisters are introduced to the "middle-aged" bachelor, Colonel Brandon, who is completely taken by Marianne, but she believes he is too old for romance. One day, Marianne is caught in the rain. She trips and sprains her ankle and is rescued by the dashing John Willoughby. He is everything Marianne could hope for. He is passionate, recites poetry, and ignores the opinions of society. The whole family eagerly waits for them to announce their engagement.

Out of nowhere, Willoughby leaves for London, cutting off contact with the now distraught Marianne. Edward comes by for a visit, a welcome distraction for even Marianne. While it’s clear he and Elinor have feelings for each other, he behaves strangely and cuts his visit short.

The plot thickens when the Steele sisters visit the family. Lucy Steele reveals to Elinor that she is secretly engaged to Edward Ferrars and swears Elinor to secrecy. Elinor is heartbroken. While Marianne is very public about her grief over Willoughby's disappearance, Elinor stoically keeps her feelings to herself.

Mrs. Jennings invites the girls to stay with her in London where Marianne bumps into Willoughby at a ball. He avoids her and later sends a letter, coldly stating that he is engaged to another, wealthy woman. Marianne is devastated. Colonel Brandon confides to Elinor that Willoughby has also seduced, impregnated and abandoned Brandon's ward.

Meanwhile, Lucy Steele is back in town and Elinor is forced to endure further heartbreak. Lucy and Edward's secret engagement is revealed, and Edward's mother disinherit him. While it is clear that Edward would like to end his engagement to Lucy, he is too honorable to do this and faces financial ruin in order to keep his promise. Elinor admits to Marianne that she has been heartbroken for the last four months and Marianne begins to appreciate the value of her sister's quiet dignity.

While traveling home, Marianne becomes dangerously ill, and Willoughby rushes to be with her. He confesses to Elinor that he married for money, not love, and that he truly loves Marianne. He has made his choice, and Elinor sends him away. Brandon has been quietly helping Marianne, and as she recovers, she begins to see that his kindness and unselfishness may be preferable to the flashy romance she once dreamed of.

Edward visits the Dashwoods and tells them that, to his great relief, Lucy Steele has thrown him over for his newly wealthy brother, Robert. He declares his love for Elinor. The Dashwood sisters find love and learn that there is a value in both "sense" and "sensibility."
Character Relationships
(or, Who's Who and What They're Up To)

Mrs. Dashwood

Elinor Dashwood

Marianne Dashwood

Margaret Dashwood

John Dashwood

Fanny Dashwood

Edward Ferrars

Robert Ferrars

Mrs. Ferrars

Lucy Steele

John Willoughby

Colonel Brandon

Anne Steele

Mrs. Jennings

Lady Middleton

Sir John Middleton

John and Elinor are half brother and sister.
Elinor and Fanny are sisters.

Mrs. Dashwood is mother to Elinor, Marianne, Margaret, and John.
Mrs. Ferrars is mother to Edward, Robert, and Mrs. Ferrars.

Mrs. Jennings is mother to Lady Middleton.

Loves

Married

Engaged

Sisters

Mother to
Jane Austen was born in 1775, the seventh of eight children in an English middle-class family. Her family had once been quite wealthy, but inheritances were given to other branches of the family. This would greatly influence Jane's writing in later years. From a young age, a large family library and trips to see theatre with her older brother fueled Jane's interest in literature. A bout of typhus forced her to leave school as a child, and she received the rest of her education at home. Her father, George encouraged her writing and provided her with access to books, ink, and paper. The family would often perform plays for each other, and at the age of 12, she wrote her first short play. She also began writing poems and stories, which would later be gathered into the *Juvenilia*.

In 1793, she wrote a short novel called *Lady Susan*, a study of a woman who uses her intelligence and charm to best anyone who dares cross her. For the remainder of her life she would focus on intelligent female characters, women whose desires are often at odds with their society.

Her father died suddenly, and the family spent several years moving from place to place in response to their sudden financial struggle. In 1811, she was finally able to publish her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, with the help of her brother, Henry, followed by *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, *Mansfield Park* in 1814, and *Emma* in 1815, but she was not credited as the author. She contracted Addison's disease, passing away on July 18, 1817. Later that year, her final two novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published, and Jane Austen's name was finally revealed to the world.

Although her life was short, her legacy is one of near cult-like devotion to her six novels because of their rich characters and language. Her legacy lives on in the hundreds of film, television, stage, and book adaptations of her work.

**Activities**
- Read or watch another of Jane Austen's works. Compare and contrast it with *Sense and Sensibility*. How are the themes of marriage and love presented differently? Make a visual representation of these similarities and differences.

Kate Hamill is an actor and writer based in New York City. In 2014, she adapted *Sense and Sensibility* for the stage, and it was hailed as "the greatest stage adaptation of the novel in history" by *The Huffington Post*. Kate originated the role of Marianne. Her adaptation has been produced by theatre companies across the country.

What makes her adaptation unique is that men have written most Austen adaptations. Hamil was tired of auditioning for the roles of girlfriend, wife, mother, or prostitute and she felt that *Sense and Sensibility* would allow her to tell a woman's story from the “female gaze.” One focus of her adaptation is that the relationship between the two sisters is center stage, showing women relating to other women instead of focusing only on romantic involvement with men.

**Activities**
- Read or watch another adaptation of an Austen novel. Compare and contrast it with this adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*. What differences do you notice in how Hamill treats the relationships between women in comparison with the romantic relationships?
Context
(or, Why Should I Care?)

Jane Austen wrote Sense and Sensibility in the midst of a seismic shift that marriage and women underwent after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The British Bill of Rights gave the prominent middle-class license to thrive instead of merely survive. This change greatly affected the role of women. Literacy rates rose for women and more and more women were able to receive a formal education.

During this time, the institution of marriage for the middle and upper classes also underwent a huge change. Marriage had been an economic arrangement, used to consolidate land, power, alliances, and security. For women, unable to earn or inherit money, marriage was the only real path to security. Love was not a consideration as the patriarchs of the families typically made these arrangements. The hope then, was that a newly married couple would develop a deep appreciation for each other, but passion or a shared vision was hardly something to be concerned with.

There was a great deal of sense and logic involved with these decisions, but a new cult of sensibility was taking hold. This new, Romantic Era was a full embrace of the vast range of emotions humans are capable of. Men and women were both expected and encouraged to feel joy, compassion, sorrow, and a deep appreciation for beauty.

The effect this had on marriage was profound. For the first time, men and women began to question whether security was enough. In a life ruled by passion and emotion, shouldn’t love be one of the most important aspects of a union? Women were pulled between the old and the new pressures, a place where Jane Austen’s work squarely sits.

Activities

• How might Jane Austen feel about love and marriage now? Write a letter between Marianne and Elinor showing their perspective on sense and sensibility in today’s world.
• Create a presentation about the pros and cons of sense and sensibility. Is one preferable to the other? Is there a way to balance logic with emotion? Are there any characters that balance both?
• How have Marianne and Elinor changed by the end of the play? Has one changed more than the other? For better or for worse?
• How do the men in the play display elements of sense and sensibility? Is one of the male characters more balanced than the others? Explain?
• In your opinion, did Jane Austen favor sense or sensibility? Stage a debate with your class arguing one side or the other, citing examples from the play or novel.
Themes
(or, What Are We Talking About?)

WOMEN AND FEMININITY – During Austen’s time, women were expected to be sweet, kind, and unobtrusive. Underneath those expectations, we see Austen portray women as complex, passionate, frustrated, malicious, and above all, human. Each woman shows the internal struggle of staying true to oneself while navigating the pressures of family and societal expectations.

Questions
• Does Austen show us an ideal model of womanhood?
• Do women today still have to manage societal expectations when it comes to their emotions and logic?
• What differences do we see between men and women in the play as it relates to emotions? Are those differences the same or different today?
• How are men expected to behave when it comes to sense and sensibility today? What are the pros and cons of this?

SOCIETY AND CLASS – Everyone in the play is pigeonholed by social class. In Austen’s time, class mobility was very limited and required extreme amounts of ambition, luck, and consolidation of wealth. Most of the characters in the play are not part of the nobility, so birthright affects their fortunes much less than financial decisions do. This is why the idea of “marrying up” is such an important consideration for the men and women who are seeking matches. Should they act with good sense and marry for financial and social benefit in an attempt to climb the social ladder or should they lead with the heart, trading in security for personal fulfillment?

Questions
• Do you agree with Willoughby or Edward in their regard to social expectations? Do you agree with one over the other?
• Is there still an element of social climbing in our country today? What does it look like?
• How does the idea of the “American Dream” conflict or align with social mobility in Jane Austen’s time?

LOVE – The characters in the play are driven by their desire to find a true and meaningful love. However, many of them find that love can be at odds with financial gain and social expectations, and this causes several characters to make questionable decisions. Marianne and Elinor are caught up in several love triangles, which challenge their morality, honor, logic, and emotions. The play illustrates that while the pursuit of love may be noble and result in true happiness, it may require vast amounts of pain along the way.

Questions
• What are the different types of love we see in the play? Who is more admirable or despicable in their quest for it?
• Do you think we view love much differently today?
• Identify the love triangles that Marianne and Elinor are in. What makes them challenging. Do you agree with whom the women end up with? Why or why not?

GOSSIP – Hamill’s adaptation uses the Gossips to represent the social structure of Austen’s time. Neighbors gossip about neighbors, judgements are expressed freely and rumors have a huge power to destroy reputations. Gossips helps drive the plot forward as Marianne and Elinor are constantly observed and evaluated by their society. Gossip remains a constant force today, especially with the inclusion of social media into so many of our daily interactions.

Questions
• How does gossip negatively or positively affect the plot of the play?
• What connections can you draw between gossip then and now? Is it better or worse today?
• How does Marianne treat gossip differently than Elinor?
• Which characters gossip most? Are some more innocent than others in how they use gossip in their interactions with people?
• How would Austen’s novel be different if it was written in 2017 in regards to the role gossip plays in the story?
Director’s Notes
(or, Q & A)

In your opinion, what keeps Sense and Sensibility so relevant more than 200 years later?
In spite of having lived a very constrained life, Austen understood human behavior as well as any writer I know. The worries and dreams, strengths and weaknesses of her characters are just as real today as when she sat in her family’s parlor to write her novels. Great writers survive because they tell every generation something true and universal about being human, and Austen is among the greatest.

Of all the adaptations of Jane Austen’s work, what excited you about this particular one?
This adaptation delighted me immediately because it gets to the heart of Austen’s wit and whimsy. Often when her novels are brought to stage or screen, they are all polite tea-sipping and swooning, and while those things are on the surface of Austen’s work, they aren’t what readers love about her. Her characters are witty, sometimes absurd and always full of life, and Hamill captures all of this.

I also love that this is an adaptation for the stage, using live performance as an essential element of the story. We watch the actors and the set transform in a whirlwind of storytelling, something that makes theatre such a unique experience.

What does the “female gaze” bring to this adaptation that will challenge audience perceptions?
One of the reasons I chose this adaptation is that Hamill leans into the female relationships. In Austen’s own life, her longest and most intimate relationship was with her sister, Cassandra. The depth and value of relationships between sisters is a regular element of Austen’s novels. While romantic love is what Elinor and Marianne are looking for, the love they have for each other is what sustains them.

In what ways do you want this production to be unique? What do you want to highlight for young audiences?
The adaptation invites very unique staging. We spin (literally) from location to location as actors play multiple characters, animals, walls and wind. For young audiences, whose primary entertainment is the hyper-reality and passive experience of movies and TV, I hope they experience the special pleasure of sharing a live experience that keeps both cast and audience leaning into a shared world.

—Lynne Collins

Activities
• Choose a character from the play and create his or her Facebook profile. What would she post, like, or say?
• Letters are a huge part of the play. Write a text conversation between two of the characters. How would they interact? Include emojis of course!
• Write an essay explaining whether it is better to have sense or sensibility. Use examples from the play to support your argument.

Additional Activities
• The play is written to reflect the speaking patterns and dialects of England in the late 1700’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 do you think he or she would say if being completely honest?
• If there were an updated version of Sense and Sensibility, how would it look in modern times? Write a brief plot outline of how the story would go in 2017. Is the ending the same or different? Explain why you made the changes you did.

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