Resource Guide

With Alignments to the National Core Arts Standards and the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content State Standards

Created by McCarter Theater Education and Engagement. 2019.
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Alignments to the Common Core Curriculum Standards and NJ Core Curriculum Content State Standards

McCarter’s production of The Niceties and the activities outlined in this guide are designed to enrich students’ educational experiences by addressing many Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening Common Core Anchor Standards as well as specific New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for Visual and Performing Arts.

Pre-Show Prep

RI.11-12.2. Determine two or more central ideas of a text, and analyze their development and how they interact to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

SL.11-12.1.A. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

Finding Inspiration: Research Activity

RL.11-12.3. Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama.

W.11-12.7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

W.11-12.9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

What’s on the Wall: An Introduction to Set Design

NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #8. Interpret Intent and Meaning in Artistic Work.

RI.11-12.9. Analyze and reflect on documents of historical and literary significance for their themes, purposes and rhetorical features, including primary source documents relevant to U.S. and/or global history.

W.11-12.9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

A Theater Reviewer Prepares

NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and Analyze Artistic Work.

NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #8. Interpret Intent and Meaning in Artistic Work.

NJSLSA.R3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Back to School Babble
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and Analyze Artistic Work.
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #8. Interpret Intent and Meaning in Artistic Work

Performance Discussion and Reflection
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and Analyze Artistic Work.
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #8. Interpret Intent and Meaning in Artistic Work.

History: A Debate
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #8. Interpret Intent and Meaning in Artistic Work.
NCAS. Relating Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.
RI.11-12.9. Analyze and reflect on documents of historical and literary significance for their themes, purposes and rhetorical features, including primary source documents relevant to U.S. and/or global history.
W.11-12.7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Peer into the Production
NCAS. Creating Anchor Standard #1. Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #8. Interpret Intent and Meaning in Artistic Work.

Bias: What is it and Who Does it Affect?
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #10. Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #11. Related artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen knowledge.

Creative Writing: What Would You Say?
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #8. Interpret Intent and Meaning in Artistic Work.
W.11-12.3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

The Review
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and Analyze Artistic Work
NCAS. Responding Anchor Standard #8. Interpret Intent and Meaning in Artistic Work
NJSLSA.R3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

The Niceties
Pre-Show Resource Guide

Jordan Boatman as Zoe and Lisa Barnes as Janine. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
Pre-Show Prep
To provide intellectual and creative context for Eleanor Burgess’ The Niceties, as a class or in small groups, explore the synopsis and character descriptions located in the Appendix and on the McCarter website. Also, check out the teaser and the production photos that can be found online.


After engaging with the synopsis, character descriptions, and the videos and photos, ask students to journal about or discuss their reactions to the materials with any of the following prompts:

- Did anything you read particularly pique your interest about the play or the characters it features? Explain your response.

- Based on the character profiles, do these characters sound like any people you know in real life? Of whom do they remind you and why?

- Based on the set that you can see in the production photos, where do you think that the show takes place? What do the various elements of set tell you about the different characters?

- When you first watched the teaser, did you focus on the dialogue between the different characters or the projected images in the background? How do the two elements work together or compete with one another? What emotions does the teaser elicit in you?
Finding Inspiration: A Research Activity

After growing up in the Northeast, playwright Eleanor Burgess proceeded to stay in New England for college and study History at Yale University. In 2015, after Burgess’ graduation, a faculty member at Yale sent out an email to a residential college about Halloween costumes and cultural sensitivity that sparked a controversy on campus, amongst alumni, and throughout the nation. While The Niceties is not about the incident, the conversations that ensued in its wake served as the inspiration for The Niceties.

Have students read the following articles from the New York Times that provide some background information about the incident and its aftermath on campus.


Lead students in a discussion about the article. Some questions that may start the conversation include:

Do you agree with the administrator’s decision to step down? Why or why not?

Do you agree with the University’s statement about her choice?

Do you think she should have been permitted to continue serving as associate master of the residential college at Yale?

If this happened in 2019, how might the reaction from the student body be different? Would it be the same? How might social media play an increased role if it happened in the present day?
Finding Inspiration: A Research Activity (continued)

Now that you have learned a bit about this incident, read an excerpt from Burgess’ interview with McCarter’s Literary Intern, Liam Gibbs, during which she talks specifically about her experience hearing conversations after the incident occurred.

But what was so interesting to me was that among my friends, many of whom are Yale alums, conversations about this topic became so dysfunctional. People felt like they had to pick a side... These aren’t bigots. These aren’t people who are indifferent to issues of racial discrimination, nor are they indifferent to issues of learning, and academia... and yet, it felt like everyone picked a side, and it felt like no one wanted to say “Yes. Academic freedom is important. And also, ensuring that students of color are having a good experience is important.” And no one wanted to say, “Yes. Learning should be challenging, should be sometimes emotionally difficult, and sometimes very mentally difficult, and it should expose you to ideas that you’re uncomfortable with. But also, can we make sure that that’s not a completely draining and exhausting system for some people while it’s a rewarding and enriching system for other people?” No one wanted to have that conversation. Everyone wanted to dismiss the people who disagreed with them and either say, “Well that person’s whiney and that’s why they have this problem,” or “that person’s a racist and that’s why they disagree with me,” and I was so fascinated by how we got to this point.

- Eleanor Burgess

Have students reflect individually or with small groups about the quote from Eleanor Burgess. Ask them to think about the following discussion questions:

| What do academic discussions that you engage in currently look like? |
| What aspects of Burgess’ quote resonate with you? Why do you think that is? |
| What are some ways that we can improve academic discourse in our classrooms and on social media? |
Finding Inspiration: A Research Activity (continued)

Go Further!

Have students research events that have happened at other universities, high schools, or companies that are similar to the one that happened at Yale. Encourage them to research their own examples but some that could serve as a jumping off point include:


- and the more recent incidents at Boston College with the racist graffiti on a dorm room door (https://www.bostonmagazine.com/education/2019/12/10/boston-college-racist-graffiti/).

| What makes these situations different from the incident that happened at Yale University? What makes them similar? |
| What can we learn from the reactions to these incidents on the various campuses? |

Lisa Barnes as Janine. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
What’s on the Wall: An Introduction to Set Design

The set designer is the person responsible for designing - and even sometimes creating - all aspects of the set for a theatrical production. The set is the scenery and other properties that are not lifted by the actors that are performing onstage. Anything that is lifted, held, or carried is considered to be a prop. The set designer works with the director, lighting designer, costume designer, and other members of the artistic team to make sure that what is on stage reflects both the playwright’s and the director’s vision.

The Niceties is set in the office of a History professor at an unnamed major university in the Northeast. Playwright Eleanor Burgess was very detailed in her description of elements that should be included in the set, even listing specific images that should appear on stage (see an excerpt from her stage directions in the script below). For this production of The Niceties, she worked very closely with set designer Cameron Anderson to decide on every item that you’ll see on stage.

There are a few framed images from revolutionary movements: a Lech Walesa / Solidarity poster; a painting of the tennis court oath; a photo of Emiliano Zapata; a photo of Nelson Mandela in a Springbok uniform; and a portrait of George Washington.

Break students up into small groups. Assign each group one image to research from the list above. After each group has conducted their research, have them present three facts about their researched image. Encourage the students to focus on the following questions:

What is this image or who is this person and what are they known for?

Is there anything about this person or image that is considered to be controversial?
What’s on the Wall (continued)

After each of the small groups has presented about their images, have students consider the reasoning behind these various images being used in the set. In a large discussion, ask students to consider:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do all of these images have in common?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think the playwright included these images in the script?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do these images tell you about the person whose office this is?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you feel walking into an office that has all of these images on the wall?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing these images are in a history professor’s office, what other images might you see? What images would you want to add?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also important to note that only some of the images outlined in the stage directions will be seen in McCarter’s production of *The Niceities*, and there are some additional images that are not listed in the script. Following the show, ask the students to consider why these images were chosen by the designer and director to accompany the ones that were listed in the script.

Jordan Boatman as Zoe and Lisa Barnes as Janine. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
A Theater Reviewer Prepares

A theater critic or reviewer is essentially a “professional audience member,” whose job is to report the news, in detail, of a play’s production and performance through active and descriptive language for a target audience of readers (e.g., their peers, their community, or those interested in the Arts). To prepare students to write an accurate, insightful and compelling theater review following their attendance at the performance of Eleanor Burgess’ The Niceties, prime them for the task by discussing in advance the three basic elements of a theatrical review: reportage, analysis and judgment.

- **Reportage** is concerned with the basic information of the production, or the journalist’s “four w’s” (i.e., who, what, where, when), as well as the elements of production, which include the text, setting, costumes, lighting, sound, acting and directing (see the Theater Reviewer’s Checklist in the Appendix). When reporting upon these observable phenomena of production, the reviewer’s approach should be factual, descriptive and objective; any reference to quality or effectiveness should be reserved for the analysis section of the review.

- With **analysis**, the theater reviewer segues into the realm of the subjective and attempts to interpret the artistic choices made by the director and designers and the effectiveness not of these choices; specific moments, ideas and images from the production are considered in the analysis.

- **Judgment** involves the reviewer’s opinion as to whether the director’s and designers’ intentions were realized, and if their collaborative, artistic endeavor was ultimately a worthwhile one. Theater reviewers always back up their opinions with reasons, evidence and details.

Remind students that the goal of a theater reviewer is “to see accurately, describe fully, think clearly, and then (and only then) to judge fairly the merits of the work” (Thaiss and Davis, Writing for the Theatre, 1999). Proper analytical preparation before the show and active listening and viewing during will result in the effective writing and crafting of their reviews.
The Niceties

Post-Show Resource Guide

Jordan Boatman as Zoe. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
Post-Show Questions for Discussion

Use the following questions as a means for students to evaluate their experience of the performance of *The Niceties*, as well as to encourage their own imaginative and artistic response. Consider also that some of the Pre-Show activities might enhance students’ appreciation of both the play and its playwright post-performance.

**The Niceties Back to School Babble**

On the bus returning from the theatre, have students write down 5 words to describe the feelings and thoughts they have about the production they just saw. For homework, ask students to elaborate on two of their chosen words either as a journaling assignment, a school-based online forum, or via social media, using #TheNicetiesPlay and @mccartertheatre on Instagram and Twitter.

**Questions to Ask Students about the Production**
- What themes of the play especially stood out in production? [Themes might include: racism, ownership of history, academic discourse etc.] What themes were made even more apparent or especially provocative in performance? Explain your responses.
- Is there a moment in the play that specifically resonated with you either intellectually or emotionally? Which moment was it and why do you think it affected you?
- Was there anything about the play—for example, its story, structure, characters, language, dramatic style—that felt new or different to you in relation to your experience of other plays you have experienced (either on the page or in performance)?
- Did you personally identify with either of the characters who were portrayed in *The Niceties*? If so, which one?

**Questions to Ask Students about the Style and Design of the Production**
- Was there a moment in *The Niceties* that was so entertaining or engaging that it remains with you? Write a vivid description of that moment. As you write your description, pretend that you are writing about the moment for someone who was unable to experience the performance.
- The director of a show is the person who is charge of executing a vision for the production. The **directorial vision** is what the director wants the play to communicate to the viewers. Summarize director Kimberly Senior’s directorial vision. What do you think she hoped the audience would take away? How did you come to this conclusion?
- What did you notice about Cameron Anderson’s scenic design? Did it provide an appropriate, effective, and/or evocative setting for the story of *The Niceties*? How and why, or why not?
- What happened with the lights in the show? How did D.M. Wood’s lighting design affect the show? In what moments did the lighting design especially enhance the world of the play?
- What did you notice about the costume designs by Kara Harmon? What do you think were the artistic and practical decisions that went into the creation of the costumes for this production?
- How did the sound design by Elisheba Ittoop add to the moments of intensity throughout the show? How did it inform the final moment of the show?
- How did the overall production elements (costumes, set, lights, sound, etc.) suit the story, inform the characters, and reflect the central themes of *The Niceties*? How did these choices support or compete with the directorial vision?

*Created by McCarter Theatre. 2019.*
History: A Debate

_The Niceties_ is rooted in the question: what exactly is history? The characters spend the entire show debating back and forth about what history is and who has the right to decide that it is history. Start by revisiting the scene below with the students. Split the class into groups of two and have each student in the pair read for one of the characters. See the accompanying worksheet in the Appendix. This scene should be used as a launching pad into the larger conversation that will take place later in the lesson.

ZOE
I’m not gonna find a diary entry where someone says, “June tenth. Today I used racism to bond with the other delegates…” That piece of paper doesn’t exist. But I know that’s what happened.

JANINE
No – no -/ you can’t –

ZOE
You can say what you want, but I know, I know, because I know how race affects people, I understand /

JANINE
You can’t just invent –

ZOE
how people work. I mean we don’t have a bunch of letters by a bunch of slave women saying, “hey, I hate being raped-/

JANINE
Actually we have those letters. Read Harriet Jacobs.

ZOE
sometimes I think about killing myself, or him,” but I know that’s how they felt –

JANINE
Wait a minute, were you – have you been raped?

ZOE
NO! I’m saying, I am a human being, I have empathy, and experiences, and I can tell how they must have felt.

JANINE
You may be right. You’re probably right. About feelings that were there. It’s possible you’re right about the effects those feelings had. But that isn’t history.

ZOE
Yes it is history. It’s a part of American history.

JANINE
I don’t mean it’s not important or it’s not part of the American story. I mean, you’re using your personal experiences to embellish on the past. That’s historical fiction. It’s not what historians do. Historians sift through evidence – documents, objects, recordings – to draw informed conclusions about the past. That is our trade.
History: A Debate (continued)

This conversation between Janine and Zoe brings up a number of huge questions: what is history? What can it be classified as? What is historical? These questions have surrounded the discipline for years now. In 1935, sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist WEB Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction in America* where he said:

“If history is going to be scientific, if the record of human action is going to be set down with that accuracy ... which will allow its use as a measuring rod and guide-post for the future of nations, there must be set some standards of ethics in research and interpretation. If, on the other hand, we are going to use history for our pleasure and amusement, ... then we must give up the idea of history either as a science or as an art... and admit frankly that we are using a version of historic fact in order to influence and educate the new generation along the way we wish.”

Now, some 80 years after WEB Du Bois made that statement, the controversy still exists. The following ideas come from Michael Galgano, Chris Amdt, and Raymond Hyser’s book, *Doing History: Research and Writing in the Digital Age*, published in 2008. They explain that some historians see history as a science. It is a field in which you need to do research and where you are able to find universal facts. However, others see it as an art. It is a humanity that engages a combination of reason and imagination to recreate the past. There are also some historians that live in the middle. History is a combination between these two different fields and cannot be classified as one or the other wholly.

Divide the class into two groups. Assign one group the argument that history is a science; assign the other the argument that history is an art. Encourage each group to spend some time working together to come up with support for their argument. This could also be assigned as homework for the students to do on an individual basis.

Once substantial research has been collected, facilitate a debate amongst the two groups. The rules are as follows:

- Each group will have three minutes for an opening statement.
- Once each group has delivered their opening statement, they will have another two minutes to discuss as a group and create various rebuttals.
- Each group will have an additional two minutes to deliver their rebuttals.
- This back and forth may continue to go on for whatever length of time so long as new arguments are being produced by the different sides.
History: A Debate (continued)

Following the debate, lead the students in a reflection. Some potential questions are included below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever participated in a debate? What about this one was difficult? What about it was easy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was there anything that the other side brought up that surprised you or caught you off guard?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was the most interesting point that was made by either side?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are conversations like this important?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lisa Barnes, Director Kimberly Senior, and Jordan Boatman. Photo by Tom Miller.
Peer into the Production

Do you remember the fight scene that took place during The Niceties? That actually required a ton of work for the artistic team and the actors. Stage combat is a specialized technique in theater designed to create the illusion of physical combat without causing any harm to the actors involved. Any fight scene in a show is required to have a fight coordinator as well as a fight captain. The fight captain leads the fight call, which happens before each and every show. This is when the actors go through the fight scene and practice at full speed exactly what they are going to do.

Lead the students in a discussion about the violence that was present in the show. Some questions that can be posed include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever seen a show that had a moment of violence? What was your reaction when you saw it then?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you surprised by the moment of violence in the show? Did you see it coming?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did the violence convey to the audience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the moment of violence necessary? Did it take away anything from the performance?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jordan Boatman as Zoe. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
Bias: What is it and Who Does it Affect

This activity is to get students thinking about some of the arguments made in The Niceties, but also to help them identify their own biases and how they may have informed their viewing of the play.

To start, pass out the corresponding worksheet (found in the Appendix) that lists a number of lines from The Niceties converted to “I believe” statements for students to consider. Ask students to consider each statement and mark on the paper how strongly they agree or disagree with each statement. Students should work independently for this portion of the activity.

“I Believe” Worksheet – Teacher’s Edition
It is important to note that these are not direct quotes from the characters. They have been changed to ‘I believe’ statements and some of the wording has been changed to protect the anonymity of the characters. Stress to the students that instead of trying to guess who said each line, they should simply focus on whether or not they agree with each of the statements.

__________ I believe that the entire point of a university is the idea of expertise. We are people who refuse to go with our feelings, our guts. We look at the evidence. And by doing that, we drive back ignorance. (JANINE)

__________ I believe that no one writes down what they’re actually feeling. (ZOE)

__________ I believe that the idea of democracy felt huge and exciting and terrifying to the people living through the American Revolution. More radical change at the time just wasn’t on the table. (JANINE)

__________ I believe that because the biggest injustice in society during the American Revolution was concentrated on just 20% of the population, it made it easier for the rest of the population to agree. (ZOE)

__________ I believe that the field of history needs people pushing, demanding modernization. (JANINE)

__________ I believe that it will always be harder to write a really excellent paper about black history than about white history. (BOTH)

__________ I believe that a dark spot on someone’s record should not negate everything that they have accomplished. (JANINE)

__________ I believe that all of our choices have consequences. (JANINE)

__________ I believe that our society buys into credentialism and signs of elitism more than actual skills. (ZOE)

__________ I believe a liberal arts education is a bunch of wealthy students spending half a million dollars to get bits of random knowledge and a piece of paper they can show employers who cannot spot skill or work ethic. (ZOE)
Bias: What is it and Who Does it Affect? (continued)

Once each student has completed the worksheet, have them get on their feet. Create a spectrum across the room. One side will represent “Strongly Agree” and the opposite side will represent “Strongly Disagree.” Clearly specify where they might stand if they are neutral, agree, or disagree. Read through the various quotes. After each statement, allow students time to find their space in the room and stand on the spectrum according to how they relate to the statement, consulting what they wrote down on their paper. Once every student has landed in their position, ask students to consider why they decided to stand where they did. Have them talk to those around them about their decision and share those group answers to the whole class. Following this short discussion, reveal which character said each quote. You may choose to have students vote to guess who said it. Continue through the quotes until you have gone through each of them.

Following the completion of this portion of the exercise, have students sit down and lead them in a reflective discussion about the experience they just had. Encourage students to think critically about why they made each of their decisions and what the reasoning behind those decisions might have been. Some discussion questions include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What was that experience like for you? Was it uncomfortable, exciting, surprising, etc.?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When you learned which character was linked to each “I believe” statement, were you surprised?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was it like to do this activity alone and then in front of your classmates?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the larger conversation with the entire group, introduce the concept of bias. Bias is **prejudice in favor of or against one thing or person and it is usually considered to be unfair**. Ask students to journal individually about the biases that they felt coming into the activity. Some prompting questions are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>By the time that you left the show, whose side were on?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was it because you believed what they were saying?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was it because some of their comments resonated with you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was it because you related to that individual? If so, how?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the character remind you of someone in your life? How did that impact your decision?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you think who you are as an individual impacts the people that you support or the arguments that you listen to more carefully?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of lessons can you learn from this experience? How can you grow from watching this show?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Created by McCarter Theatre. 2019.*
Creative Writing: What Would You Say?

In the second act of *The Niceties*, the characters discuss the repercussions of their discussion, the recording, and their altercation. They bring up the widespread attention that the recording has brought on them, both positive and negative.

Have students imagine that they go to the unnamed elite university that Zoe attends and that Janine teaches at. Have students write an article for the university’s newspaper about the incident that took place between Zoe and Janine. Challenge them to think like a playwright and create dialogue from imaginary interviews that can be used in the article. Ask students to consider the following:

| What kind of article are you going to write? |
| An editorial? An investigative piece? |
| What might this impact your voice throughout the piece? |
| What information is helpful for the student body to know? |
| Do you think that this will affect other aspects of student life? How so? |

Jordan Boatman as Zoe and Lisa Barnes as Janine. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
**The Niceties: The Review**

A theater critic or reviewer is essentially a “professional audience member,” whose job is to provide reportage of a play’s production and performance through active and descriptive language for a target audience of readers (e.g., their peers, their community, or those interested in the arts).

To start, have students research online for theatrical reviews of The Niceties production at McCarter Theatre. Once a number of reviews have been culled from online, break students up in to pairs and ask them to analyze and critique the review both for their critical perspective and for their quality of writing. Ask them to consider:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Did the reviewer use active and descriptive language? What words or phrases particularly stood out in the review?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Did the reviewer consider/discuss all of the elements of production (i.e. scenic elements, costumes, lighting, music, acting and direction)?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Did the reviewer seem to understand and articulate the intentions of the play and provide a personal judgment as to whether or not the production succeeded?</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then, have students take on the role of theater critic by writing a review of the production. Reviewers often ask themselves:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the playwright and this production attempting to do?</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just like the ones that the students read, the critic also offers personal judgment as to whether the artistic intentions of a production were achieved, effective and worthwhile. Things to consider before writing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guidance</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student reviewers may want to use words generated from the “Back to School Bus Babble” exercise of this guide.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theater critics/reviewers always back up their opinions with evidence and details.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>The elements of production that can be discussed in a theatrical review are the play text or script (and its themes, plot, characters, etc.), scenic elements, costumes, lighting, sound, music, acting and direction (i.e., how all of these elements are put together). [See the Theater Reviewer’s Checklist located in the Appendix.]</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Encourage students to submit their reviews to the school newspaper for publication, and ask them to email them to us at adaniels@mccarter.org!
The Niceties
Appendix

Lisa Barnes as Janine. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.
The Niceties Synopsis

1. In late March of 2016 at an elite university in the American Northeast, black college junior Zoe Reed, a political science major, meets with her white history professor Janine Bosko to review a draft of a paper that Zoe has written for Janine’s class on revolutions. Janine’s office is full of books and decorated with portraits of famous revolutionaries, including a large painting of George Washington. As she looks at the paper, Janine admires Zoe’s word choice while also critiquing her grammar, pointing out a missing comma and reminding her to use parallel structure in her sentences. Zoe admits that, though she was thoroughly taught parallelism in high school, she did not proofread her draft as well as she normally would have because she had a tough weekend and wanted to get Janine’s feedback before the final deadline. Much to Zoe’s dismay, however, Janine’s comments go beyond grammar. She tells Zoe that the paper could use more flare and encourages her to add details that make the past feel human and real. She pulls out a book and uses an example from South Asian history, telling Zoe a story about a British man sent to overthrow a province in 1843 who alerted the Colonial Office of his victory by using a pun written in Latin. Zoe points out that a joke about colonialism is disturbing, but Janine insists that such a story reveals a lot about history. She uses another example from American history, telling Zoe about the tactics George Washington used to convince the Continental Congress to appoint him as general. Zoe expresses distaste at Janine’s admiration for that moment in history, but Janine doesn’t catch on to her tone. Janine offers Zoe the book on South Asian history to borrow, and she reluctantly accepts.

2. After critiquing her writing, Janine tells Zoe that her entire argument is fundamentally unsound, and that she should rewrite the paper in full. Janine disagrees with Zoe’s contention that “A successful American Revolution was only possible because of the existence of slavery,” and while Zoe cites details from class that support her theory, much to her dismay, Janine does not accept the thesis since it lacks suitable historical evidence. Zoe points her to a generic online source in her footnotes, but Janine disapproves of her reliance on Internet research. They then argue over the accuracy of Zoe’s assertion that wealthy and poor whites were unified by their mutual interest in preserving slavery. Janine pauses to compliment Zoe on her tenacity and willingness to debate and then changes her mind, telling Zoe to keep her thesis but find and add primary sources to support it. Zoe asserts that she won’t be able to find this kind of proof, because only facts are recorded—not feelings. Janine agrees that Zoe is likely right about enslaved people’s and slaveholders’ opinions on slavery but tells her that history is not based on empathy, but on evidence. Zoe reminds her that some people did not leave evidence behind, either because they were physically unable or did not have the privilege to do so.

3. Janine encourages Zoe to find sources that support her thesis, but Zoe understands that it may not be possible for her to both assert her argument and please her professor—especially before the looming deadline. Zoe shares that she spent spring break writing the paper and devotes much of her time both on campus and off to organizing and protesting social injustices, which will make it a challenge for her to find time to complete the rewrite Janine requests. Janine does not accept this as an excuse, referring to Zoe’s political activism as “extracurriculars” and telling her to accept the consequences of her decisions. Zoe informs Janine that she hopes to receive a prestigious community and political activism fellowship after graduation, for which she needs a high GPA, but Janine won’t be flexible with her grade. They debate the purposes of higher education: Janine insists that Zoe learn certain research skills, but Zoe believes that she is there
to learn about what interests her and to qualify for a job she wants.

4. Zoe then turns to critiquing Janine’s overall performance as a professor, noting that she commonly mispronounces students’ names and doesn’t ask for their gender pronouns. Janine does not see these as significant issues and explains why she handles issues of identity in class as she does. Zoe responds by telling Janine that these actions makes her unfit to be a teacher. When Janine tries to argue with her, Zoe points out Janine’s ignorance of how her words can impact her students (especially her students of color), using Janine’s story about colonialism in India as an example of her thoughtlessness. She then pulls out her notebook from class and shows Janine that she has taken note of every insensitive comment her professors have made that semester, including many made by Janine. Janine and Zoe continue to argue about their differing perspectives; while Janine admits that she is far from perfect, when Zoe asks her to add more black history to her syllabus, she doesn’t see its relevance to her curriculum. Zoe continues to repeat offensive quotes from class to Janine, but Janine defends them, not understanding the trauma that Zoe tells her she experiences. Eventually, Janine tells Zoe to “get over” slavery because it didn’t happen to her, and that there are other, more contemporary issues that should upset Zoe. Moreover, Janine tells Zoe that if she continues to proceed through life with this negative outlook, she will not succeed in life, because, according to Janine, “everyone is tired of hearing about racism.”

5. Zoe picks up her phone and shows Janine that she has been recording their conversation, which is legal in their jurisdiction. Janine insists that she has not said anything wrong, and that she is not a racist, but she tells Zoe to delete the recording nevertheless. When Zoe demands that Janine admit that she is a racist and announces that she intends to release the entire recording to the public, Janine lunges at her and tries to grab her phone, injuring herself in the process. However, it’s too late—Zoe has published the recording online.

6. About a month later, Zoe returns to Janine’s office, where the portrait of George Washington has been removed. Janine has been expecting her, and she starts their conversation by apologizing to Zoe, telling her that she did not even try to understand her feelings or listen to her in their first conversation. Zoe talks about the viral response to the recording, including articles and protests, and laments that she does not feel like a person anymore due to the way she has been picked apart in the media. Zoe apologizes if the events have caused personal or familial problems for Janine, but Janine says she is grateful for Zoe’s actions, because they refreshed her perspective on privilege and her practice as a scholar. Despite this, her tenure is under review by the university, she has been suspended without pay, publication of her upcoming book has been postponed indefinitely, she has been dismissed from her political consulting work, and her son is barely speaking to her. Zoe has received death threats and reports that she does not leave her room much anymore, not even to go to class—she has taken an incomplete for the semester.

7. In response, Janine proposes that she and Zoe release a joint statement of amicability, saying that Janine is grateful for how Zoe made her aware of issues in both her teaching and the field. Janine tells Zoe she can include anything she wants and that the statement would be a good step forward for her, since releasing the recording may impair her future employment prospects. Zoe expresses to Janine that she wants to make concrete changes that have meaning, so she suggests that they propose a resource center for underprivileged students on campus, with therapists, tutors, advisors, and financial aid assistance that takes their identities and backgrounds into account. Janine adds to this by suggesting that they call upon the university to divest from for-profit prisons, and Zoe takes it a step further, calling for a decolonized curriculum.
across the entire university and a wholly inclusive and diverse admissions policy within five years. Zoe’s proposals for institutional change grow more and more radical. Janine starts to push back, but Zoe tells her that she doesn’t have the right to do so. Janine insists that Zoe’s goals are unrealistic and her tactics are off-putting, maintaining that they must wait for democracy to take its course. Zoe suggests that democracy doesn’t work, especially when it comes to advocating for those in the minority.

*Spoiler alert! If you would like to read what happens next in the story and how the play ends, click here.*

8. Frustrated with Janine’s refusal to see her point of view regarding social justice on campus and nationwide, Zoe suggests that Janine step down from the faculty and be replaced with a professor of color, who she believes will better teach American History and support students of color on campus. Zoe believes that little will change if Janine remains in her position, and she is tired of only small changes and improvements, while Janine maintains that she has done her best and is only a victim of her circumstances. Zoe further contends that Janine (and other privileged white people) must give up some of their power in order to establish justice on campus and worldwide, which Janine finds preposterous. Janine questions Zoe’s mental wellness and tells her that she just wants everything to go back to the way it was before their first meeting, but Zoe retains her goal of radical change. Janine chides Zoe for missing the point of the class: radical revolutions don’t work and aren’t worth it. Zoe disagrees: radical revolutions overturn oppressors. Zoe calls Janine a coward, and Janine tells Zoe that she has learned nothing. Zoe returns the book that Janine lent her at their first meeting, and the two part ways with some final harsh words.
The Niceties Character Profiles

JANINE
An esteemed white liberal professor of History at a top Ivy League university. Janine lives in a world of scholarship, and seeks to teach and model the historical method to the next generation of historians. She challenges her students to formulate fundamentally sound arguments supported by reliable, critically scrutinized research—with primary sources as the highest standard of legitimate evidence from which to interpret the historical past.

Janine
You may be right. You’re probably right. About feelings that were there.
It’s possible you’re right about the effects those feelings had. But that isn’t history.

Zoe
Yes it is history. It’s part of American History.

Janine
I don’t mean it’s not important or it’s not part of the American Story.
I mean, you’re using your personal experiences to embellish on the past.
That’s historical fiction. It’s not what historians do.
Historians sift through evidence – documents, objects, recordings – to draw informed conclusions about the past.
That’s our trade. Ordinary people guess.

(Act 1)

ZOE
A bright, precocious, and highly engaged black student who is majoring in political science and working on a paper for Janine’s class. Like many undergraduates, Zoe is juggling many academic and extracurricular commitments as she tries to make her ambitious goals a reality. While Zoe’s heart is in her busy extracurricular life of radical political action and social justice, she also needs to keep her grades up in order to get into her dream future activist’s fellowship program after graduation.

Zoe
No I don’t need help. I mean I don’t have time. My schedule is already crazy.
I used Spring Break to write this paper, I thought I had already done this essay. More than / done it.

Janine
[…] You know I never do this. But I can offer you a one week extension.

Zoe
Thank you. But… There’s a rally next week in Bridgeport for police reform.

Janine
You don’t live in Bridgeport.

Zoe
That’s why it’s going to take so long, we have to get there.
And we’re doing a recruitment event the day before. And then Howard Stern is visiting campus.

Janine
And you’re…going to see him or protesting him?

Zoe
Protesting him obviously.

(Act 1)
“I Believe” Worksheet

Read the statements below and decide whether you agree or disagree. In the column marked “Personal”: if you agree, write an “A,” and if you disagree, write a “D.” Think about why you feel that way and be prepared to share your opinions with the entire group.

Personal

_________ I believe that the entire point of a university is the idea of expertise. We are people who refuse to go with our feelings, our guts. We look at the evidence. And by doing that, we drive back ignorance.

_________ I believe that no one writes down what they’re actually feeling.

_________ I believe that the idea of democracy felt huge and exciting and terrifying to the people living through the American Revolution. More radical change at the time just wasn’t on the table.

_________ I believe that because the biggest injustice in society during the American Revolution was concentrated on just 20% of the population, it made it easier for the rest of the population to agree.

_________ I believe that the field of history needs people pushing, demanding modernization.

_________ I believe that it will always be harder to write a really excellent paper about black history than about white history.

_________ I believe that a dark spot on someone’s record should not negate everything that they have accomplished.

_________ I believe that all of our choices have consequences.

_________ I believe that our society buys into credentialism and signs of elitism more than actual skills.

_________ I believe a liberal arts education is a bunch of wealthy students spending half a million dollars to get bits of random knowledge and a piece of paper they can show employers who cannot spot skill or work ethic.
Theater Reviewer’s Checklist

Use this form as an aid to heighten your awareness before the play and prompt your memory after it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production:</th>
<th>Date of Production:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playwright:</td>
<td>Venue: McCarter Theatre Center</td>
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### Key
- ✓: Element

#### TEXT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Major characters</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Main ideas/themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effectiveness of language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other textual elements</td>
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</table>

#### SETTING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical appearance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
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<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Color</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship to theater’s architecture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship to world of the play</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other scenic elements</td>
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#### COSTUMES

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choice of period</td>
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<td>Color</td>
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<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
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<tr>
<td>Style</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship to characters of the play</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other costume elements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key ✓ Element</td>
<td>LIGHTING</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Atmosphere created</td>
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<td>Color choices</td>
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<td>Style</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Enhancement of/detraction from mood</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other lighting elements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key ✓ Element</td>
<td>SOUND</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Function of effects or musical score</td>
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<td>Specific effects that support or compete with action of play</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other sonic elements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key ✓ Element</td>
<td>ACTING</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clarity of characterization</td>
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<td>Vocal and physical work</td>
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<td>Notable moments in the performance</td>
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<td>Sense of ensemble playing/acting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other acting elements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key ✓ Element</td>
<td>DIRECTING</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Clarity of storytelling</td>
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<td>Casting choices</td>
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<td>Tempo and rhythm of performance</td>
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<td>Composition of stage images</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other directorial elements</td>
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Adapted from Christopher Thaiss' and Rick Davis' *Writing for the Theatre* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), p. 45