

Rough House

**Created and performed by Andy Massingham
Directed by Brian Quirt
A Nightswimming (Toronto) production**

Study Guide

**The National Arts Centre English Theatre
Programmes for Student Audiences
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About This Guide

This study guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They can be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes.

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***Rough House* – The Production Team**

Rough House is a production of Nightswimming, a theatre company from Toronto, whose artistic mission (as stated on their website) is to explore “challenging theatrical forms and emotionally rich stories with bold visual style.”

The company was founded by Brian Quirt, a director and dramaturg with extensive experience in choreography. Quirt was nominated for Dora Awards for Outstanding Direction for his work on *Rough House* (2005) and on Don Druick’s *Through the Eyes* (2003). He is currently President of LMDA (Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas). In 2003 he received the Elliot Hayes Award for Dramaturgy from the LMDA in recognition of his work with Nightswimming.

The other company principal is Naomi Campbell, an award-winning independent producer of over 60 plays, most of them new Canadian works. She has over 25 years of experience in the theatre world—as an actor, administrator, stage manager, designer, director and producer.

Quirt envisaged his company as a “dramaturgical theatre company,” one that would commission new works in theatre and dance and then see them through the development process. The company’s name comes from the title of a song by R.E.M. popular in the 1990s. The word, says Quirt, “evoked theatre for me—swimming at night, and dreaming, and being on that line between water and air.”

Rough House is a perfect example of Nightswimming’s highly collaborative and dream-rich theatre. These are the people involved in this production:

Andy Massingham.....Creator and Performer
Brian Quirt..... Director
Rebecca Picherack and **Michelle Ramsay** Lighting Design
Naomi Campbell Producer
Judi Pearl Stage Manager

A Brief Description of the Work

“The body doesn’t lie, where words do.”
– Andy Massingham

A combination of slapstick, dance and shadow play, *Rough House* is an example of physical theatre—the art of telling a story through body movement. The piece opens with a virtually empty stage: the only props are a chair, a light bulb and a bowl. We also see the translucent walls surrounding the set, and the shadows behind them, and we understand that lighting will play a vital role in the performance.

A man enters, takes stock of the situation, and begins to explore. But the reality he is exploring turns out to be maddeningly changeable, and his attempts to control it are constantly undercut. He has to experiment, invent—and sometimes just submit.

Rough House is a supremely elemental kind of theatre: there is only one character, one act, and no dialogue. In the course of the 50-minute performance, we watch the character confront reality and assert himself. There is recreation and meditation, triumph and humiliation, rest and extreme physical endeavour. The interplay of light and shadow is always there, sometimes mocking the character and sometimes encouraging him. The show ends, as it began, in a tableau of darkness and light.

For his performance in *Rough House*, Andy Massingham won a Dora Mavor Moore Award in 2005 for Outstanding Performer. Lighting designers Rebecca Picherack and Michelle Ramsay also received a Dora for their work on the play.

A Backgrounder on Physical Theatre

Physical theatre gathers together many strands: dance, mime, clowning, acrobatics, and the art of the silent movie. What sets it apart from other kinds of theatre is that physical movement is just as important as words. Indeed, physical theatre is often wordless—many of its adherents feel that the body speaks most clearly without language. But since it *is* theatre, narrative and character are as integral to it as to other forms of literature.

In Europe, perhaps the most famous school of physical theatre was founded in Paris by Jacques Lecoq (1921–1999). Lecoq’s school emphasized clowning, mask theatre and mime—all sophisticated arts with long traditions. A number of contemporary physical theatre groups, such as Told by an Idiot and Complicite (both based in London, England), and Theatre Columbus and Theatre Smith Gilmour (of Toronto) have been either founded or directed by graduates of the Lecoq school. In Canada, a whole generation of physical actors was influenced by Richard Pochinko (1946–1989), a clown who trained at the Lecoq school but who sought to incorporate other traditions into his teaching and performing. Pochinko was friends with the Native American clown Jonsmith, who taught him much about the “trickster fool” tradition in Native culture. In this tradition, the clown is more than an entertainer: he is something of a shaman, in touch with spiritual forces.

In 1988, Michael Kennard and John Turner, two students of Pochinko’s, formed a clown duo called Mump and Smoot whose surreal and sometimes disturbing comedy has won worldwide acclaim. They have enjoyed successful runs in regional theatres across North America, including the La Jolla Playhouse and the Yale Repertory Theatre, and have taught clowning in such distant locales as the University of Tel Aviv in Israel, where the class included both Palestinians and Israelis.

Physical theatre relies heavily on improvisation. A narrative is often created from *within*, from the body moving through space and time; the story unfurls moment by moment, depending on what the actor discovers in the space around him. In conventional theatre, there is generally a script, a framework imposed from *without*. It is interesting to compare the different kinds of stories that emerge from the different forms.

Andy Massingham – A Biography

Andy Massingham traces his love of physical theatre back to the age of eight, when he saw Charlie Chaplin's classic silent film *Modern Times*. "I didn't talk in school for two days after that; I did everything in pantomime," he says. As a self-described "class clown and show-off," he got involved in high school theatre and went on to study theatre at George Brown College in Toronto. One of his mentors there was Richard Pochinko, whose practice embraced many traditions—method acting, clowning, American native "fool" training—and who helped Massingham develop his own versatility. From Pochinko he also learned that a true clown appeals to the heart first and the mind second, and offers himself in humility—"free of ego, free of guile," as Massingham says—to the audience.

Although Massingham has deep roots in clowning and physical comedy, he is also a stage actor and has worked with Soulpepper and Tarragon Theatres in Toronto. He is currently a member of the Stratford Festival company, where he has performed in *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, among other productions.

Although he admits to having done "Joe jobs" to support his acting (there was a two-year period where he had no acting work at all), teaching has been his main supplementary work. "I started teaching at Tarragon Theatre," he says, "and I found that I was able to articulate in class when I couldn't articulate in rehearsals." He taught physical comedy at Humber College from 2000 to 2004 and has presented his own workshops at various theatrical venues. He will be offering one of his workshops, "Body Physics," during the NAC's presentation of *Rough House*.

During the early runs of *Rough House*, Massingham sometimes found himself falling into the role of teacher as well as performer. "I would come out after changing backstage," he recalls, "and people had actually jumped onto the stage and were duplicating bits of the show. I remember a parent saying to their kid, 'Get off the stage, there's *the guy!*' But I said, 'No, let's do a bit.' They'd ask me how I did something, and I'd show them. That was heaven to me. It was not a normal theatrical experience: I was mingling with people and teaching them bits of the show."

His advice to aspiring actors? "Do anything that flexes the creative muscles" — drawing, painting, writing. He himself was an enthusiastic participant in high-school theatre, although he recognizes that a lot of accomplished actors were, as teenagers, too shy to try out for school plays. But no matter how shy you are, he says, you can always go to see plays. "Hang out at the stage door. Congratulate and thank actors and technicians. They love to hear it."

The Genesis of *Rough House*

Rough House was commissioned by Brian Quirt, the founder and artistic director of Nightswimming see “*Rough House* – The Production Team” on page 1).

“When Brian commissioned the piece,” recalls Andy Massingham, “he said, ‘You have *carte blanche*. I don’t even want to be involved until you want me to be.’” Massingham initially worked solo and then with choreographer Julia Sasso, developing material and videotaping himself. Eventually he created an immense archive of falls, rolls and slapstick pieces. It was then that Quirt entered the process and started putting the ideas in order. “He didn’t ask, ‘What is the story?’ or ‘What’s it about?’” says Massingham. “It was more like, ‘What are the links between this bit and that bit?’” There was no script, of course, but there were the videotapes, and Massingham had drawn “floor plans” that traced out his movements on the stage.

In keeping with its fluid, improvisational nature, *Rough House* continued to evolve as it was performed publicly. Initially there were only two props, a chair and a bowl. In November 2003, lighting designer Rebecca Picherack suggested another prop, a light bulb suspended above the stage, which became an important element at the beginning and the end of the show. In January 2005, the translucent walls of the “*Rough House*” were added, enhancing the possibilities of the shadow play.

In choosing the music for the piece, Massingham listened above all to “the rhythm the body was making.” He points out that in a wordless piece of theatre, music can drastically alter the texture of the action. “The minute you get someone doing pantomime and there’s music, you get this dreamlike, silent-movie world—it looks like they’re floating, operating at a different speed from normal. We liked the idea of that, but too much of it and it seems like one endless dream. We needed this guy to have gravity, to have weight. Those moments when there isn’t music are quite startling.”

In actual performances, improvisation is built into the piece. Some sections are deliberately loose, allowing Massingham to strike out on his own; if the audience responds, he will go with it. But his lighting designer has to know approximately where he is going, and consequently he has devised signals to let her track his movements. “If I put my hand to the side of my head,” says Massingham, “it means I am coming to the end of the section. We’re loose, but we’re tight.”

To prepare for each performance, Massingham does a physical warm-up, then a 20- to 40-minute spontaneous creation to music; the lighting designer improvises with the performance. Interestingly, even though no words are spoken in the show, Massingham generally does a vocal warm-up as well: breath control is essential. Sometimes he does a quick run-through of the show, but he keeps it short because it is so physically demanding. “Otherwise,” remarks Massingham, “I would just burn myself out.”

The Director and Performer Talk About *Rough House*

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The following are excerpts from separate interviews with Andy Massingham (AM), the writer and performer of *Rough House*, and Brian Quirt (BQ), the director.

On Physical Theatre

AM: “I’m interested in alternative forms of communication. If I start talking, I overexplain.”

BQ: “I’ve always been interested in theatre that isn’t just about words, and I have always believed that theatre benefits from a choreographer’s sense of space. When I was at The Theatre Centre here [in Toronto] I worked on many dance pieces, and I loved the way the choreographers saw space—how they *used* space.”

On What *Rough House* Is About

BQ: “What is the story *you* see in it? When we did the run in Toronto, I would overhear people saying things like, ‘I liked the part where he [Andy Massingham] is a paraplegic.’ And someone else would say, ‘What part do you mean?’ And after being told where the part was, they would say, ‘No, that part wasn’t about *that*. *Here’s* what that part was about.’ I thought that meant an entirely successful piece of theatre.”

AM: “It’s about one man’s battle against gravity, and the balancing act that we all do every day with that. What is balance? How do we keep balance? After the show, I ask students, ‘Did you see yourself on stage, or did you see just a funny guy?’ And here’s the interesting part: not everyone has the same story. They’re filling in their own blanks.”

On the Conversation with Light

BQ: “*Rough House* is a duet for light and performer. It was created by a lighting designer, an actor and myself. Light is a character in the play. Students understand what it means to talk to another person on stage, but what does it mean when that other person is light?”

AM: “If there is anybody who wrote this play with me, it was Rebecca [Picherack, the lighting designer.] She really got into the whole world; her lighting designs were as playful as anything I could have come up with.”

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The Director and Performer Talk About *Rough House*, cont'd. – Page 2 of 2

On Complementary Abilities

AM: “His (Brian Quirt’s) great strength as a dramaturg is that he can take scripts apart and put them back together... and I don’t have a script! I would draw floor plans, almost like the play-by-play plans of football coaches, and *that* was my script. And Brian would look at those and arrange them in a way he felt was interesting. The running joke is that Brian knows what the play is about, and I don’t have a clue.”

BQ: “One of the first productions we did together was my adaptation of Jane Urquhart’s novel *The Whirlpool*, which was entirely choreographed by a wonderful choreographer, Julia Sasso. One of the actors in that show was Andy Massingham. He was trained as an actor, not a dancer, but the play revealed how beautifully he moves through space. After the show, he said, ‘You know, I’ve been working in physical comedy for a long time, and I have idea for a show—but I don’t know what it is or should be.’ I said, ‘Would a commission help?’ He said yes, and off we went.”

On the Artistic Lessons of *Rough House*

AM: “One of the biggest lessons I learned was about editing and cutting. You hang on to the stuff you think is great, but then one day you realize, ‘This is holding me back.’ We fought tooth and nail with a bit in *Rough House* that just wasn’t working, and Brian and I were pounding our heads, trying to make it work. Then one day our stage manager said, ‘I have an idea: why don’t we just cut it?’ And I’ve never thought about it since.”

BQ: “We relied entirely on instinct. We couldn’t say, ‘At this point in the play, he has to meet so-and-so in order for the plot to make sense.’ I had to ask, ‘What feeling does the audience need to be experiencing at this stage in the journey?’ Similarly, Andy as a character is acting instinctually, moment to moment, in the way that physical comedians do—you know, ‘the light bulb is blinking; therefore it’s saying something to me.’ It’s an intuitive judgment right then.”

Pre-Performance Activities

Because *Rough House* is an example of physical theatre, certain theatrical elements become vitally important—elements that are less important in conventional plays. Here are some things to watch for:

- What images begin and end the play?
- How are light and shadows used?
- How is music used? Note what is happening when there is no music.
- Were there any sequences where you weren't sure what was going on?
- Keep attuned to the rhythm of the action. Notice the quiet interludes and where they come in relation to the active sequences.
- How does Andy Massingham move around the stage? How does he use the stage space?

Further Preparatory Exercises

1. *Type of Activity:* Analysis

Show the class a classic silent film—for example, the NFB short *The Railrodder* (starring Buster Keaton) or Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Many students may never have seen a silent film before. Analyze this genre of storytelling, particularly the way humour is used. How does the wordless medium challenge the artist and the audience?

2. *Type of Activity:* Research

Have the students do some research on the traditions that make up physical theatre—for example, clowning. Of particular interest is the Native American tradition as practised by Richard Pochinko's mentor, Jonsmith. What are the characteristics of the various clowning traditions? (See the websites listed in the "Further Resources" section on page 13.)

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The following exercises are appropriate for most grades, providing some modification is made in vocabulary and emphasis. The last section outlines an activity that is particularly suitable for younger students.

Questions for Discussion and Analysis

1. Brian Quirt has said, “One question I’d like students to think about is, why doesn’t he [Andy Massingham’s character] say anything? In most plays, even when people are alone, they can’t stop talking.” Would adding dialogue weaken or strengthen the play?
2. Brian Quirt and Andy Massingham chose to make the play non-verbal. Suppose the students made a different artistic choice, and decided to write some dialogue for it. What would Andy Massingham say to the chair, the light bulb, the shadows—or the audience? Could there be some kind of dialogue that would do justice to the impressionistic nature of the play—for example, a word collage or an improvisation of voice tones?
3. Director Brian Quirt has said that in *Rough House*, “light is a character.” Discuss.
4. In some sections of *Rough House*—for example, the sports sequences—the audience knows more or less what is going on; other sections are more enigmatic. Identify those sections and discuss possible interpretations.
5. Is there a story or a journey in *Rough House*? Recall how the play begins and ends: is there a circular movement to the play? Are there any epiphanies—that is, moments of deep understanding on the part of the character?
6. Compare *Rough House* to an episode of the British comedy series *Mr. Bean*. What are the differences and similarities? Which puts more demands on our imagination?
7. Andy Massingham has said that *Rough House* is about the “battle against gravity and the balancing act that we all do every day with that.” What other themes do students see?

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Post-Performance Activities – Page 2 of 3

Activity/Assignment Questions

1. Brian Quirt named his theatre company “Nightswimming.” Have the students come up with a name for their own theatre company and an artistic mission to go along with it. What kind(s) of theatre would their company specialize in? (See Nightswimming’s website, listed under “Further Resources,” for that company’s mission statement.)
2. Astronauts and freestyle skiers know about the battle with gravity, but all of us have had to contend with forces that hold us down. Ask the students to describe a situation where they battled gravity (literally or figuratively). It could have been while learning to ride a bike, or mastering a tricky move on the skateboard, or giving a piano recital and having to conquer their nervousness. How did they achieve balance? How is humour a weapon against gravity?
3. Have the students do a short piece of physical theatre, using a minimum of props. The students might choose to act out a story that is not known to the audience—for example, a true story taken from the newspapers. Afterwards, ask the audience members to re-tell the story as they understand it. Compare their versions with the actual story.
4. The way *Rough House* was conceived and developed can tell us something about the creative process (see “The Genesis of *Rough House*,” page 7). Improvisation, editing, deadlines, collaboration, rehearsals, the importance of feedback—all these factors figured in the enterprise. Improvisation is particularly important in physical theatre and, surprisingly, can also be used in creative writing. The technique, called “freewriting,” is described by Peter Elbow in his book *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Give the students a starting point for their writing. It could be a theme, a phrase, a picture, or a “stock situation” from fiction—for example, a family eating dinner at a table where one chair is empty. Have them then start writing a story as fast as they can, always going forward and ignoring grammar and style. Let the piece emerge from the process of writing. At the end of a designated time (say an hour), have them stop and put away the stories for later revision. Is this freewheeling method a better avenue to creativity than thinking exhaustively about the work beforehand?

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For Younger Students in Particular

“The body doesn’t lie,” says Andy Massingham, “while words do.” Police investigators often have to interpret body language when interviewing witnesses. *The Canadian Private Investigator’s Manual*, by James D. Hawkins and Elaine Konstan (Toronto: Emond Montgomery Publications Limited, 2003), includes a section on how to tell when a witness is lying by noting eye movements, tone of voice, etc.

Designate a few students as “detectives” and have them do some research on the physical indicators of lying. Have the other students in the class—the “witnesses”—come up with stories about themselves on some theme related to *Rough House* (for example, the battle against gravity, the recalcitrance of the mechanical world, etc.). Have some students choose true stories about themselves, while others invent theirs. The detectives then have to identify the made-up stories by listening carefully to the spoken accounts and looking for signs of deceitfulness. Are the indicators of lying always reliable? What strategies can the “witnesses” employ—in both the composition and presentation of the stories—to convince their listeners that they are telling the truth?

Theatre Etiquette

Please take a moment to prepare your students for their visit to the National Arts Centre by explaining good **theatre etiquette**.

1. Matinee performances at the National Arts Centre (NAC) are for both students and the general public. It is important for everyone to be quiet (no talking or rustling of materials) during the performance so others do not lose their immersion in the “world of the play.” Unlike movie actors, stage actors can see and hear the audience, and will only give their best performances when they feel the positive involvement of the audience members. The appropriate way to show approval of the actors’ performances is through laughter and applause. For the enjoyment of all, anyone who disturbs others during the show may be asked to leave the theatre.
2. It is important that electronic devices **not** be used in the theatre, so that the atmosphere of the play not be interrupted and others not be disturbed. Please turn off all cell phones, pagers, and anything else that beeps. Cameras and other recording devices are not permitted in the theatre.
3. *Rough House* will be performed in the Studio of the NAC. Seating in the Studio is open (i.e., the seats are not numbered), so those attending may sit where they choose. Teachers may wish to distribute tickets before arriving at the doors of the Studio.
4. It is always a good idea to take a trip to the washroom before the play starts. Anyone who leaves while the show is in progress will not be allowed back into the theatre. ***Rough House* runs without an intermission.**

Further Resources

Websites relating to physical theatre, mime and clowning

General:

www.mime.info

www.artslynx.org/theatre/index.htm (click on “physical theatre”)

www.canadianclowning.com

Specific companies and actors:

www.complicite.org

www.mumpandsmoot.com

www.geocities.com/nion44/comm.html (This website provides information about Richard Pochinko)

www.nightswimmingtheatre.com

A selection of silent or near-silent films

Modern Times (1936), directed by Charlie Chaplin

Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot (1953), directed by Jacques Tati

The Railrodder (1965), a National Film Board short film starring Buster Keaton in one of his final roles

Silent Movie (1976), directed by Mel Brooks



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