

7 Important Things

a STO Union (Ottawa) production
in coproduction with NAC English Theatre

Study Guide

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This Study Guide was written and researched by **Jamieson Findlay** for the National Arts Centre, English Theatre, February 2007. It may be used solely for educational purposes.

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About This Guide

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

Table of Contents	page(s)
<i>7 Important Things: An Introduction to the Work</i>	3
The Principals in the Production: Nadia Ross and George Acheson.....	4 - 5
STO Union and Non-Traditional Theatre	6 - 7
The 1960s and 70s — A Cultural Primer	7 - 8
Pre-performance Activities	9
Post-performance Activities	10 - 12
Theatre Etiquette	13
Further Resources.....	14
Acknowledgements	15

7 Important Things

**written and directed by Nadia Ross
in collaboration with George Acheson**

**performed by George Acheson and Nadia Ross
Lighting Design by Steve Lucas
Video Projections by the Wakefield Artists Collective**

An Introduction to the Work

The audience members sit in a darkened theatre, watching an invented story with invented characters. They have left their own lives behind in order to experience the lives of fictional people. Isn't this why we go to see plays?

The Ottawa-based theatre company STO Union takes a different approach. Their play *7 Important Things* uses a real person and a real story — not a made-up character, not an invented life. The real story is as follows:

In 1971, George Acheson sat in an abandoned farmhouse in Perkins, Quebec. His hair was long. He had traveled to Morocco. He had been at Woodstock. He'd been to Berkeley and San Francisco. He had protested the war in Vietnam. As the hippie movement disintegrated all around him, George hung onto the ideology, helplessly hoping. A few short years later, George would find himself in London, U.K., at the birth of yet another counter-culture movement: punk rock. He embraced it whole-heartedly and it too disintegrated around him. Throughout his entire life, George would come to identify with cultural movements that went directly against the mainstream, that opposed the status quo. Now in his mid-50s, George can no longer identify with a counter-culture: not because he is too old or is no longer radical, but because he believes that everything, absolutely everything, that goes against the mainstream now is reduced to yet another item to be consumed. In essence there is no opposing the "unstoppable growth of Growth" in capitalism gone wild. George is a failed Utopian, but he is in no way bitter about that fact.

George appears as George onstage, and we the audience participate in the examination of his life — and, by extension, an examination of our own.

"Art has to put the audience in collision or conjunction with a question they have to solve," says Nadia Ross, Artistic Director of STO Union. *"The production's intent is to highlight a question that we feel is pivotal at this time in our experience."* Perhaps this guide will help bring the audience a bit closer to this pivotal question.

The Principals in the Production: Nadia Ross and George Acheson (page 1 of 2)

Founder and Artistic Director of STO Union, **Nadia Ross** is an actor, director, producer, composer and writer. Born of a Québécois mother and Scottish father, she has split her time between the two cultures, living both in Ontario and Quebec at different times in her life.

While attending Glebe Collegiate in Ottawa, she saw her first play at the National Arts Centre — a production of Molière. In a recent issue of C magazine (Toronto), she describes her experience as follows: *“I was bored beyond my ability to tolerate it. The events onstage were utterly predictable to me, as if I had seen them a thousand times. But more than this, there was an artificial quality to the production, as if it were some oily character in a 24-hour restaurant who was trying his best to seduce and charm me.”*

Nevertheless, she saw drama as her calling and studied the subject at the University of Toronto. Early in her acting career, she underwent another negative yet illuminating experience in traditional theatre: she forgot her lines in the middle of a performance. *“I had been struggling against the boredom,”* she writes in C magazine, *“working diligently to find a way to make the experience meaningful, when suddenly what I was supposed to say was completely out of reach. In frustration I gave up, and no longer trying to recapture the sentences I began to simply look around. Every gesture, from my fellow actor nervously shifting his weight to his other foot to an audience-member pushing her eyeglasses up, lit up, becoming beautiful in its ordinariness. These were simple, human gestures and they were moving to me. I was experiencing ‘unspectacular intimacy.’ The idea of the ordinary as extraordinary in contemporary art is by no means new. But, like many ideas, we have visited this one briefly...”*

After apprenticing at the Berliner Ensemble in East Germany, the Heidelberg Stadt Theatre in West Germany, and the Burgtheater in Vienna, she returned to Toronto and joined an informal group of theatre artists who were working to transform drama in the city. These artists included Daniel Brooks, Daniel MacIvor, Darren O’Donnell, Tracy Wright, Jacob Wren and Paulette Phillips. This era — the late 80s and 90s — was a fruitful time for alternative theatre in Toronto. *“People were sick of traditional narrative,”* says Ross, *“sick of the Stratfords that had all the money. They wanted to do something different.”* Out of this turbulent time came her own company, STO Union, whose role she saw as responding to *“the global cultural discourse.”*

The Principals in the Production: Nadia Ross and George Acheson (page 2 of 2)

STO Union has won acclaim for two works, *Revolutions in Therapy* and *Recent Experiences*, both collaborations with Jacob Wren. *Revolutions in Therapy* premiered at the Montreal International Festival FTA/Théâtres du Monde in May 2004, and was presented a year later in Toronto and the Theater der Welt in Stuttgart, Germany. *Recent Experiences* premiered in 2000 in Toronto and has been independently produced in cities as diverse as Tehran (Tehran Centre for Dramatic Arts) and Stuttgart (Stuttgart Stadt Theater). Both works continue to tour worldwide.

Nadia Ross has also won awards as a writer (the Chalmer's Award in 1995 for *The Alistair Trilogy*, a collaboration with Diane Cave) and as a performer (a Dora Mavor Moore Award for her ensemble work in *The Lorca Play*, directed by Daniel Brooks and Daniel MacIvor). STO Union has also received a Dora Award for sound design (by Richard Ferren) for *Excerpts From The Emo Journals* (co-written and co-directed by Ross and Daniel MacIvor – Theatre Passe Muraille (Toronto), 1995).

The following biography of **George Acheson** is limited to essentials, since part of the purpose of the play is to explore his life.

The son of a military father, George Acheson left home while still in his teens and hitchhiked to the west coast of Canada to become a hippie. Over the next few years, while travelling extensively, he lived through many of the cultural watersheds of the 60s and 70s. He attended the legendary Woodstock music festival in New York State; he protested the Vietnam War; and he was in London, working for Canada's External Affairs, when the punk rock group The Sex Pistols first hit it big. On returning to Canada, he moved to Toronto and became a hair-dresser, working on Queen Street West and cutting hair in alternative salons that catered to "young, white hipsters." He is now a barber in the town of Wakefield, Quebec and a contributing artist to STO Union.

He has no formal training as an actor, but he says that he has always thought of himself as an artist: *"I've got a good eye and a good ear. I've worked with oil pastels, India ink and water colours, but I could never find anything I was really satisfied with. I'm hoping that theatre will do it."*

STO Union and Non-Traditional Theatre

“I’ve never been too interested in the theatre. I’ve walked out of more plays than I’ve sat through.”

George Acheson

The watchword of STO Union is “authenticity.” Its plays tend to be grounded in real-life stories. Fictional elements are woven into each play, but there is always a strong “*homeopathic dose of truth*,” in the words of Nadia Ross.

The plays of STO Union take shape through a series of informal workshops, unfolding over several years. These workshops do not revolve around a text, a plot, or a directorial vision. The process, says Ross, resembles the development of a website: images affect the text, the text affects the music, and the music affects the images. It’s a very fluid, free-form way to make theatre. Once the project has acquired a clear shape, however, STO Union reverts to traditional rehearsals. The play is memorized thoroughly—in fact, overmemorized. In this way (the theory goes) performers on stage are freed from worrying about their performance and can focus on “being present.” “*The idea here is not to ‘act,’*” explains Ross, “*but to be ‘present’ to oneself and the event rather than to be present through a character.*”

“Being present” is a constant theme with STO Union. It comes from the practice of meditation, which Ross has explored in parallel with theatre. Being present simply means being aware, inhabiting a particular moment mindfully, with your senses alert. To take an example: if you are walking down the street thinking about the math test you have tomorrow, completely involved in your own thoughts and oblivious to your surroundings, you are not being present. But if you are fully conscious of yourself at that moment, feeling your feet on the ground and hearing the noise of the traffic around you (and perhaps even being aware of your anxiety over the test) ... then you are being present.

One role of the theatre, believes Ross, is to help us be present. It should bring us back to ourselves, to our reality. And often it doesn’t—in fact, it encourages escape from reality. It is mere “spectacle,” which (for Ross) means fabricated reality. Spectacle is the essence of advertising, of television, of the movies. It is often outsized, exaggerated, bold-coloured—which is what makes it so seductive. When we are drawn into spectacle, we are drawn out of ourselves.

STO Union deliberately rejects spectacle and embraces “unspectacular intimacy.” It is true that *7 Important Things* uses fictional elements—“mini-plays” — but they are at the service of an overarching real story. In a spectacle, we always need to be entertained; boredom is the enemy of spectacle (and of record-setting runs on Broadway). But STO Union even thinks that boredom is okay — in small doses. Boredom can create a “natural emptiness” that is ready to be filled by the actual.

A word about the name, “STO Union.” STO is an acronym whose meaning is constantly changing. Last year, Ross decided it stood for, “Startling Twinkling Obsession”; this year it means, “Still Trudging On.”

“Happiness. Despair. Belief. Hope. Money. Connection. Transcendence. These are common themes in the theatre but rarely are they addressed as directly as they are by STO Union.”

Los Angeles Times, 2006

The 1960s and 70s – A Cultural Primer (page 1 of 2)

George Acheson lived through many of the events that are now the stuff of movies and television — and plays. Here is a capsule description of three of them; more information can be found in the works cited under “Further Resources” (page 14).

Woodstock: The high-water mark of 60s counter-culture, Woodstock was a sprawling music festival held in lower New York State in mid-August of 1969. Originally the festival was supposed to take place in the actual town of Woodstock, N.Y., but the municipality offered no site for such a huge event. Eventually a local man, Sam Yasgur, persuaded his father Max to allow the festival to be held in the family’s alfalfa field, about 40 miles from Woodstock. The elder Yasgur could not have known what he was letting himself in for. Organizers had planned for a maximum of 200,000 attendees, but over half a million people showed up. Visitors had to abandon their cars on the highway and walk for miles to the concert area. The weekend was rainy, the fields turned to mud, and facilities were strained to the breaking point. Drugs were readily available; one person died of a heroin overdose. The documentary film *Woodstock* (1970) captures very well the chaotic spirit of the festival.

Woodstock was billed as “three days of peace and music,” and many of the era’s best-known performers played there, including Janis Joplin, The Who, Jefferson Airplane, and Jimi Hendrix. Successor concerts were held in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, but none of these sequels managed to achieve the mythic status of the original Woodstock. The latest one, held in 1999, was dubbed “Birkenstock” (after the upmarket footwear manufacturer) since the attendees tended to be older, much wealthier and much better dressed than the original concert-goers.

The Vietnam War: This war had its roots in an eight-year-long conflict between France (the colonial power in Indochina) and Communist anti-colonial forces. Under the Geneva Peace Accords of 1954, Vietnam was divided into two states — a northern Communist one, inspired by the Russian and Chinese examples, and a southern one, supported by France and the United States. Despite partition and the establishment of a demilitarized zone, however, the two states continued to war with each other.

The Americans saw the conflict in Cold War terms, as part of their battle against world-wide Communism, and by 1965 were supplying active combat units to South Vietnam. China and Russia, in turn, funnelled arms and supplies into North Vietnam. The war between North and South escalated throughout the late sixties, and as more and more American lives were lost, domestic opposition to the war grew. Many people opposed the war on moral grounds, and anti-war rallies on American college campuses became widespread. In May 1968, the United States and North Vietnam began peace talks in Paris, and the U.S. began to extricate itself from a war which had become widely unpopular at home. The last American combat units were withdrawn in 1973. Two years later, North Vietnam launched a massive and successful invasion of the South, and in 1976, the country was re-united as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The 1960s and 70s – A Cultural Primer (page 2 of 2)

The Punk Rock Movement: “*All we’re trying to do,*” said Johnny Rotten, “*is destroy everything.*” The songs of Rotten’s British group The Sex Pistols exemplify punk music — loud, anarchic and fiery. Punk was fiercely anti-establishment, but much more nihilistic than the hippie culture of the 60s. This was especially true of British punk, which arose in the mid-70s out of a social background of high unemployment, boredom and despair. The Sex Pistols quickly made a name for themselves through outrage and excess: the bass player, Sid Vicious, often mutilated himself on stage with broken beer bottles. Punk music, whether British or American, sought a return to primal rock energy; its practitioners were savagely contemptuous of the watered-down, 60s-influenced songs of the era. The music was associated with punk fashions (or anti-fashions) such as dyed or spiked hair, body piercing, ripped T shirts, studded leather jackets and black boots. The heyday of punk music was the mid to late 70s.

What’s in a Word?

Hippies, Yippies and Yuppies

If you cut into these words you will find layers of stored time, like the growth rings in trees. They are cultural histories in miniature.

Hippie: this word has several sources, including “hip” meaning “aware, in the know,” and “hipster,” a cool cat or dude. It first appeared in its modern incarnation in a 1965 article by the journalist Michael Fallon; he was describing the “beatnik” clientele of the Blue Unicorn Coffee House in San Francisco. It became widespread in 1967 after San Francisco Chronicle columnist Herb Caen began using it in his daily columns. Eventually it was used to describe a whole generation — those who grew their hair long, wore unconventional clothes (including beads and flowers), and rejected established values.

Yippie: The root “yip” was an acronym for “Youth International Party,” founded in 1967 by Abby Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and friends. The flag of the party featured a red star with a green marijuana leaf superimposed over it. “Yippie” was generally used to describe politically active hippies.

Yuppie: Short for “young urban professionals,” the word came into common use during the early 80s, and describes those people who are definitely neither hippies nor yippies—who have embraced an affluent, careerist lifestyle and the established values that go with it.

Pre-performance Activities

7 Important Things is an unconventional work in many ways, and requires openness and patience on the part of the audience. Here are some things to think about as you settle in to watch it:

- How are lighting, music and other media used in the production?
- Is there any development or progression?
- Note the structure of the play – in particular, the interweaving of “illusions” (or mini-plays) with “discussions.”
- Remember, finally, that Nadia Ross has said that art should bring us “into collision” with a pivotal question. What questions arise in your mind as the play unfolds?

Further Preparatory Exercises

Type of Activity: Discussion and Analysis

- The students will benefit from knowing something about the cultural history of the 60s and 70s. One approach is to listen to several quintessential songs from the era — for example, “Woodstock” by Joni Mitchell, “White Rabbit” by Jefferson Airplane, “God Save the Queen” by the Sex Pistols, and “Blitzkrieg Pop” by the Ramones. What do the music and lyrics tell us about the sensibilities of the era? The classic documentary film *Woodstock: Three Days of Peace and Music* (or selections thereof) can also provide a good background, but please note that it is rated “R.” See “Further Resources” (page 14) for details.

The students might ask themselves which events of the 60s and 70s they would have liked to live through. Are there any parallels between events of that era and the events of today (e.g., Vietnam and Iraq?)

- Have the students do some research on mindfulness meditation (see “Further Resources” (page 14) for some suggestions). What are the benefits of mindfulness? Can the students bring the qualities of mindfulness to the performance of the play?

Post-performance Activities (page 1 of 3)

Discussion/Analysis Questions

- 1.** Explain the significance of the title.
- 2.** Throughout the play there are encounters between George and certain archetypal figures — the Child in Act one, the Judge (as seen through George's Father), the Beast (George in the Punk Era). What do these archetypal figures stand for?
- 3.** What is the purpose of interweaving fictional elements (the “illusions”) with the discussions? Is this technique successful?
- 4.** How does George change from beginning to the end? How does he view his life now?
- 5.** Does the play assume too much knowledge on the part of the audience about the 60s and 70s? Should there have been more explicit references to this era?
- 6.** Is George fair to the figures of his past, such as his father? What would the father say in his own defence?
- 7.** Is George's life a well-lived one?
- 8.** How does George view the world of today? Do you agree with him?
- 9.** The play traces parallels between the trajectory of a society and that of an individual life. How do George's dilemmas and tragedies reflect those of modern society?
- 10.** As a performer, George is doubly vulnerable: not only is he doing something for which he has no professional training, but he is appearing in a play that analyzes his own life. Does his vulnerability serve to involve you more completely in the play? Which do you think would be more difficult — appearing as yourself on stage, or playing a role?
- 11.** What is the pivotal question (or questions) posed by the play?

Post-performance Activities (page 2 of 3)

Activity/Assignment Questions (page 1 of 2)

1. Both George Acheson and Nadia Ross have used the word “Faustian” in reference to *7 Important Things*. Have the students do research on the word and its origins and then consider how it applies to the play. What other works explore the Faustian theme?
2. *7 Important Things* is at opposite poles to (say) Shakespeare. If the students have previously seen a more traditional sort of play, have them compare the experiences of seeing both works. Arrange a debate about the merits of “spectacle” vs. “authentic” theatre. What sort of play appeals to them — as budding actors, directors or writers?
3. “*It’s better to burn out,*” sang the Canadian folk-rock singer Neil Young, “*than to fade away.*” Many rebels of the 60s and 70s lived short, self-destructive lives. Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison (lead singer for rock group The Doors), and Sid Vicious all died relatively young. Imagine if these figures had not died, but had aged along with their peers; imagine further that they have assembled today to look back on their lives. Have the students do the necessary biographical research and then write a dialogue involving several of these figures. What sort of people would these rebels be now? How would they view their own achievements? What would their attitudes be towards today’s youth and music?

Variant exercise: imagine that these figures have come back from the past to be interviewed. Students might take turns playing the role of rebel and interviewer.

4. The students begin this exercise by imagining that they are attending the Woodstock Festival of 1969. There they encounter several characters who embody different cultural viewpoints — a yippie, a famous rock musician, an older local resident who is hostile to the festival, an undercover FBI agent, a father searching for his runaway daughter. The students are to write several diary entries describing their encounters with these characters. (Alternatively, the students can dramatize these encounters in a one-act play; this approach has the advantage of requiring the students to inhabit the role of at least one older, unsympathetic figure). Which of these Woodstock characters can be associated with the archetypal forces — Child, Judge, Beast, Adult — that appear in *7 Important Things*? Can these characters be brought to understand one another’s viewpoints?

Post-Performance Activities (page 3 of 3)

Activity/Assignment Questions (page 2 of 2)

5. One of STO Union's preoccupations is authenticity versus illusion. Consider the cultural smorgasbord available today — the Internet, e-mail, cell phones, YouTube, and TV reality shows. Do these phenomena work to make our experience of the world more authentic, or do they turn us into mere consumers and spectators? Do they do both at once? Have the students list the merits and demerits of these and other cultural offerings of our technological society. Does the "authentic theatre" of STO Union achieve something that these phenomena cannot?

6. Explore the question of what makes a well-lived life. Have the students write down the names of people they believe exemplify a well-lived life. What are the criteria for such a life? Can a life be well-lived without being happy or comfortable? (See the two essays entitled, "*If I had my life to live over,*" cited under "Further Resources" (page 14).

Another approach is to have the students write down a list of their lifetime goals. In this connection, the class might want to consider the ambitious and often entertaining lifetime goals of the explorer John Goddard (www.johngoddard.info), who wrote down 127 such goals at the age of 15. Are goals (and their realization) the best way to measure a well-lived life?

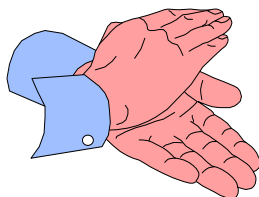
7. Have the students imagine themselves meeting at a high school reunion 40 years from now. Get them to collaborate on a short dialogue or one-act play dramatizing the encounter, drawing on the above discussion of the well lived life.



Theatre Etiquette

Please take a moment to prepare your students for their visit to the National Arts Centre (NAC) by explaining good **Theatre Etiquette** which will enhance the enjoyment of the play by all audience members.

1. *7 Important Things* will be performed in the Studio of the NAC. 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 movies, the actors in live theatre can hear disturbances in the audience and will give their best performances when they feel the positive involvement of the audience members. The appropriate way of showing approval for the actors’ performance is through laughter and applause. For the enjoyment of all, people who disturb others during the show may be asked to leave the Studio.
2. It is important that no electronic devices be used in the Studio so that the atmosphere of the play is not interrupted and others are not disturbed. Cell phones, pagers and anything that beeps must be turned off. Cameras and all other recording devices are not permitted in the Studio.
3. Seating in the NAC Studio is by general admission, wherein those attending may select their own seat upon entering. Teachers may wish to distribute tickets before arriving at the Studio.
4. A trip to the washroom before the play begins is a good idea. Anyone leaving while a play is in progress may not be allowed back into the Studio. There will be no intermission.



Further Resources

1. The 1960s and 70s

Book(s):

Anstey, Robert G. *Musical Icons of the 60s*. Sardis, B.C.: West Coast Paradise Pub, 2004.

Film(s) and Television Series:

The History of Rock 'n' Roll (documentary – five part series, 578 minutes). Time-Life Video and Television, 2004. Canadian home video rating: 14A. Includes a section on punk rock.

Woodstock: Three Days of Peace and Music (1970; documentary, 225 minutes). Directed by Michael Wadleigh. Warner Home Video, 1999. (Rated R for drug content, nudity and language).

Website(s):

www.woodstock69.com

2. Mindfulness and Being Present

Book(s):

Kabat-Zinn, Jon, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. New York: Hyperion, 1994.

*Tolle, Eckhart, *The Power of Now*. Vancouver: Namaste, 1997.

Website(s):

*www.eckharttolle.com)

3. The Well-Lived Life

Website(s):

www.devpsy.org/nonscience/daisies.html This website features the two essays on the theme, "If I had my life to live over," by Nadine Stair and Don Herold.

www.johngoddard.info For information about the explorer John Goddard, including his list of life goals.



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