

The Dumb Waiter

by **Harold Pinter**
and

The Zoo Story

by **Edward Albee**

a Soulpepper Theatre (Toronto) production

Study Guide

**THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES
2005–2006 SEASON**

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About This Guide

This study guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages, which may be used separately or in any combination which works for your class.

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Theatre of the Absurd (page 1 of 2)

Theatre of the Absurd refers to particular plays written by European and American playwrights of the post-Second World War period who shared the view of many existential philosophers that life is meaningless, communication impossible, society robotic and inhuman. These playwrights could not express these views within the framework of traditional theatre; they needed new modes of expression, new venues, new dramatic structures and new stage imagery, and thus Theatre of the Absurd was born.

Two people in particular played key roles in the development of Theatre of the Absurd. In his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*,* French philosopher **Albert Camus** defined the human situation as meaningless and absurd; it was the Hungarian-born British writer **Martin Esslin** who coined the actual phrase “Theatre of the Absurd” in his book of the same title, published in 1961, in which he comments on this disorienting postwar drama. At first, most audiences were opposed to this style of theatre because they didn’t understand it. However, as the movement gained intellectual currency and momentum, more and more theatre-goers began to enjoy the experience of a new and challenging drama performed in church basements and other unconventional venues.

Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), author of *Waiting for Godot*, was the first to gain international fame as an absurdist playwright. Irish by birth, he moved to Paris in the 1920s. His plays gained popularity first in France and then elsewhere. Beckett’s plays are characteristic of the post-war 1950s, a time when people still felt the threat of war and their own powerless to understand or control the world they lived in.

Unlike the existential philosophers, the playwrights of Theatre of the Absurd did not try to resolve the issues around the absurdity of the human condition but rather alluded to the greatest question: why are we all here? Unable to answer the question, many Absurdist plays are circular: they end where they started, with no apparent resolution, no happy ending, and no definite call to action. Language is devalued, communication is non-literal and action and images prevail. By choosing to depart from traditional dramatic conventions, the absurdist portrayed on the stage the chaos and despair they experienced in the world.

* According to Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned to push a heavy stone up a steep hill; but before he reached the top the stone always rolled down, and he had to begin all over again.

Theatre of the Absurd (page 2 of 2)

Other great playwrights who contributed to Theatre of the Absurd:

Samuel Beckett (1906–1989)

Endgame (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Happy Days* (1961), *Come and Go* (1966), *That Time* (1976).

Eugene Ionesco (1912–1994)

The Bald Soprano (1949), *The Lesson* (1950), *The Chairs* (1952), *The Killer* (1959), *Exit the King* (1962), *Hunger and Thirst* (1966), *Macbett* (1972), *The Man with the Suitcases* (1975).

Jean Genet (1910–1986) *The Maids* (1947), *Deathwatch* (1949), *The Balcony* (1956), *The Blacks* (1959), *The Screens* (1961).

Arthur Adamov (1908–1971)

The Invasion (1950), *Parody* (1952), *All Against All* (1953), *Paolo Paoli* (1957), *Spring '71* (1960).

Playwrights who continued the tradition after 1960:

Fernando Arrabal in Spain,

Tom Stoppard in England,

Gunter Grass and **Peter Weiss** in Germany,

Israel Horovitz and **Sam Shepard** in the USA,

Vaclav Havel in the Czech Republic.

Characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd (page 1 of 1)

- Situations and characters' emotional states may be represented through poetic metaphor (dreamlike, fantastical or nightmarish images).
- The notion of realism is rejected: situations and characters are not “realistic” and characters are often placed in obviously unreal situations.
- Set and costumes may not reflect an outward reality.
- Dialogue is often nonsensical, clichéd or gibberish.
- Communication is fractured.
- There is usually an emphasis on “theatricality” as opposed to realism.
- Absurdist playwrights often use dark comedy for satiric effect.
- Characters exist in a bubble without the possibility of communication.
- Characters may be one-dimensional, with no clear motivation or purpose.
- Characters may be symbolic of universal situations.
- Behaviour and situations may not follow the rules of logic.
- Structure may be circular, without a precise resolution.
- Action may be minimal.
- Setting of the play may be in one locale.
- Often characters perceive a threat from the “outside”, leading to a sense of powerlessness.

AFTER VIEWING THE PLAY, DISCUSS:

Which of the characteristics above were true of *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Zoo Story*? Discuss as a class how the plays were representative of Theatre of the Absurd. How were the staging, the script, the acting, the directing and the costumes and set characteristic of Theatre of the Absurd?

Production Who's Who (page 1 of 1)

The Dumb Waiter by Harold Pinter, directed by Ted Dykstra

The Zoo Story by Edward Albee, directed by Diana Leblanc

a Soulpepper Theatre Company (Toronto) production



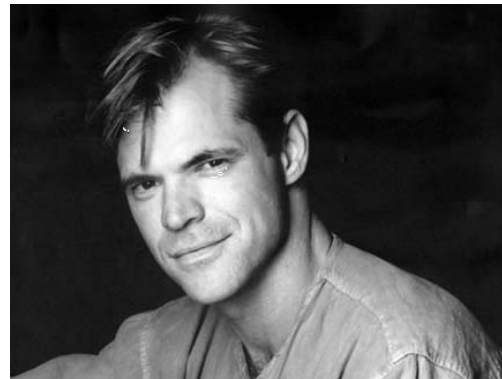
starring Michael Hanrahan

*Pinter's **The Dumb Waiter** is a play in which the mystery and menace of an offstage character dictate the actions of the men trapped on stage. In pairing it with **The Zoo Story** we get a rich and powerful examination of the disenfranchised, in a world which unfolds beyond our control.*

Albert Schultz
Artistic Director, Soulpepper Theatre Co.

Two wonderful directors were brought to the project. Both of these artists are also founders of Soulpepper and both—not incidentally—are actors as well as directors. The rehearsal environment therefore was one in which respect and rigour were always given to the two extraordinary texts, but where the strength, intelligence, talent, soul—and chemistry—of two wonderful actors was the engine of the enterprise.

Albert Schultz
Artistic Director, Soulpepper Theatre Co.



and Stuart Hughes

The Dumb Waiter: About the Playwright (page 1 of 1)

Harold Pinter, the only child of a Jewish tailor, was born on October 10, 1930 in Hackney, London. His passion for acting began when he was a child in grammar school and continued into his teens, when he enrolled in acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. After two unhappy years he switched to the Central School of Speech and Drama. In his 20s Pinter toured Ireland performing Shakespeare, and acted on the stages of London and smaller provincial repertory companies. At this time Pinter was devoted to poems and short stories which for the most part remain unpublished.

Pinter wrote his first play, *The Room* (1957), in just a few days for a university drama festival. *The Birthday Party* (1958) premiered in London to disastrous reviews and a six-day run. Two years later Pinter came back with *The Caretaker*, an instant success. Throughout the 1960s Pinter wrote for television, film and stage, gaining popularity and respect, and in 1966 he was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Throughout his career Pinter not only wrote plays, but directed and even acted in his own work.

Harold Pinter's plays have an air of mystery, as characters' personal qualities, situations and motivations are left unexplained. Subtext dominates both the dialogue and the silences: what is unspoken is often more important than what is spoken. The plays begin in a light, often comical tone that gradually changes to one of anxiety, conflict and fear where the threat of an unknown, powerful, often omniscient danger prevails. This dark presence controls everything, including the characters' lives. The characters' reaction to this danger is the source of conflict and action in Pinter's plays.

Pinter is considered to be on the fringes of absurdist theatre. He creates the premise of a realistic drama by writing surface dialogue and middle-class characters, but adds an absurdist dimension by having his characters struggle with the complexities of a dark, inhuman and inexplicable world.

Pinter achieved a great international reputation and is one of the most highly respected playwrights in the world today. At age 75, he continues to write plays and shows no sign of slowing down.

Plays by Harold Pinter:	<i>The Dumb Waiter</i> (1957)	<i>No Man's Land</i> (1975)
	<i>The Birthday Party</i> (1958)	<i>Betrayal</i> (1978)
	<i>The Homecoming</i> (1965)	<i>A kind of Alaska</i> (1982)
	<i>Old Times</i> (1970)	<i>Moonlight</i> (1993)

For a complete list, see www.haroldpinter.org/plays/index.shtml.

The Dumb Waiter: Background Information (page 1 of 1)

Themes

- Miscommunication between individuals.
- Arbitrary leadership.
- The gap between social classes.
- The expendability of individuals.
- The struggle for equality and meaning.

Characters

Ben: A long-time hit man discontented with his job and life, becoming emotional and childlike as he questions his duties. He is ashamed of the fact that he is part of the lowest social class and dreams of a better life. Ben works in a field where he is expected to do as he is told, not question orders and accept them as routine. His newfound perspective is extremely dangerous. He forgets that within the world of crime he is easily expendable and replaceable.

Gus: The more senior hit man. He has been Ben's partner for a long time, but his loyalty is to the boss, Winston. Gus accepts his criminal status and does not question his social ranking. He is tired of listening to Ben ramble. He does his job as a matter of course and spends his free time making model boats and creating woodwork.

Setting

The basement of an unspecified building in Birmingham, England.

Synopsis

The day begins like any other day for hit men Gus and Ben. Gus reads the paper and Ben chats about the room. As they sit and wait for their orders, the tension mounts. Ben questions their last job, and the very nature of their work. He is curious about the details of the present job and wants to know more about their boss, Winston. Ben's banter irritates Gus and the tension escalates. When the dumb waiter in the room springs to action, the two discover they are not alone in the building. They frantically try to fulfill the requests that come in via the dumb waiter, including the final one with the instructions for their next job.

What is a "dumb waiter"?

A dumb waiter is a small elevator used to transport meals and dirty dishes between floors, usually in restaurants. It has a speaking tube enabling communication between floors; however, one cannot speak and listen simultaneously. The dumb waiter symbolizes the broken communication between Ben and Gus: they speak *at* one another rather than *to* one another. The pulleys of the dumb waiter symbolize the strings that Winston, the boss and puppet master, manipulates as he controls Ben's and Gus' lives.

The Dumb Waiter: Lesson Plan #1 (page 1 of 5)

Topic:	Minimal Scripts
Objective:	Identify and understand subtext in <i>The Dumb Waiter</i> .
Grades:	10–12
Materials:	Chalkboard or chart paper, empty room, minimal scripts (included herein).
Curriculum Links:	ADA30 Theory - Role/Character By the end of this course, students will: demonstrate an understanding of subtext, motivation, and status in the development of a character.

Warm- Up/Engage 5 min	Students pair off and decide who is yes and who is no , then create a dialogue using only these words. Students should improvise with their body language and tone and volume of voice. Encourage students not to pre-plan, but create their scene on the spot. Ask students what kinds of relationships emerged. Was there conflict and/ or resolution? Who had power? How was it established?
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Activate 35 min	A) Divide the class into new partners and distribute the scenes. Have students read the script once without thinking of the subtext. B) As a class, create a list of locations. Some possibilities are: <table><tr><td><i>Church</i></td><td><i>Beach</i></td></tr><tr><td><i>Playground</i></td><td><i>Restaurant</i></td></tr><tr><td><i>Graveyard</i></td><td><i>School</i></td></tr><tr><td><i>Hotel</i></td><td><i>Movie theatre</i></td></tr><tr><td><i>Bus</i></td><td><i>Hospital</i></td></tr><tr><td><i>Subway</i></td><td><i>Art gallery</i></td></tr></table> Now have students read their scene again three times, each time with a different location in mind. continued on next page ...	<i>Church</i>	<i>Beach</i>	<i>Playground</i>	<i>Restaurant</i>	<i>Graveyard</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Hotel</i>	<i>Movie theatre</i>	<i>Bus</i>	<i>Hospital</i>	<i>Subway</i>	<i>Art gallery</i>
<i>Church</i>	<i>Beach</i>												
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<i>Graveyard</i>	<i>School</i>												
<i>Hotel</i>	<i>Movie theatre</i>												
<i>Bus</i>	<i>Hospital</i>												
<i>Subway</i>	<i>Art gallery</i>												

The Dumb Waiter: Lesson Plan #1 (page 2 of 5)

<p>Activate continued.</p>	<p>C) Next have students brainstorm a list of characters and their relationships. Some ideas are:</p> <p><i>Mother-Daughter</i> <i>Father-Son</i> <i>Teacher-Student</i> <i>Brother-Sister</i> <i>Lifeguard-Patron</i> <i>Priest-Clergy</i> <i>Boss-Assistant</i> <i>Salesperson-Shopper</i></p> <p>Now have students read their scene again three times, each time choosing a different character relationship.</p> <p>D) Finally, have students choose one location and one relationship and allow them to practise their scene and then present it to the class. Encourage the class to determine and discuss the subtext, the location and the relationship.</p>
<p>Analysis 10 min (or homework)</p>	<p>Have the students write their choice of location and characters on their script. Next, have them write the subtext beneath the actual script.</p> <p>Ask students to write a one-page report accompanying their script to describe why they chose that particular subtext and that particular location and character. Did something in the minimal script evoke that choice for them?</p>

The Dumb Waiter: Lesson Plan #1 (page 3 of 5)

Minimal Script Extension Exercise

Setting up the scene

Encourage students to explore silence. What happens before the characters speak? Using the minimal scripts, tell students to create different scenarios before they speak their lines. For example, one character could be sleeping, another eating; or perhaps they are playing catch in the garden. Also allow your students time to play with entrances and on-stage placement. From which side of the stage do characters enter? Or are they both already on stage? What is the distance between characters? Have the students consider how they can use blocking to tell the story before the characters begin to speak (weather, location, prior circumstances, relationship, mood). Ask students to try creating three different scenarios (each scenario should last at least two minutes).

Discussion for next class after viewing the play

If you have a copy of the play *The Dumb Waiter*, introduce students to the “light the kettle” vs. “put on the kettle” scene. Ask students to discuss the subtext in this scene. What was really going on below the surface? Was it a discussion about syntax, or is there a deeper meaning related to the power struggle between the characters? If you do not have a copy of the play, describe this scene to your students and encourage them to watch out for it while viewing the play, then discuss the subtext in the scene when you get back to the classroom.

The Dumb Waiter: Lesson Plan #1 (page 4 of 5)

Minimal Script #1

A: Have you seen it yet?
B: No, you?
A: Not yet.
B: How long have you been waiting?
A: Awhile
B: Me too.

(pause)

A: Is that it?
B: What?
A: Is that it?
B: Where?
A: Over there!
B: Where?
A: There!!!
B: Oh no, I don't think so.
A: That's too bad.
B: Yeah.

Minimal Script #2

A: It's hot.
B: Do you really think so?
A: Yes.
B: I rather like it.
A: How could you like it?
B: It doesn't bother me.
A: But do you prefer it?
B: I don't mind it.
A: Are you sure?
B: Yes.
A: Suit yourself.

The Dumb Waiter: Lesson Plan #1 (page 5 of 5)

Minimal Script #3

- A: I'm ready.
B: I'm coming.
A: I want to start.
B: Okay, go ahead, start.
A: Are you coming?
B: Yes, give me a minute.
A: What's taking you so long?
B: It's not as easy as it looks.
A: Hurry up.
B: I've almost got it.
A: Do you need my help?
B: No, I'll manage.
A: I have to go.
B: Fine. *(pause)* Go.
A: Are you mad?
B: Why would I be mad?
A: I really have to go.
B: Then go!
A: Fine, I'm going.
B: Good.

Minimal Script #4

- A: I understand.
B: I don't believe you do.
A: I know what you mean.
B: How could you possibly know?
A: I have my ways.
B: That is most unfair.
A: I was bound to find out sooner or later.
B: I can't believe you know.
A: It's okay.
B: What do you mean?
A: I understand.
B: I thought you would.

The Dumb Waiter: Lesson Plan #2 (page 1 of 1)

Topic:	Newspaper Scenes
Objective:	Use the media to create a scene.
Grades:	10–12
Materials:	Plenty of newspapers and an empty space.
Curriculum Links:	ADA3M — Creation By the end of this course, students will: create a working script for production, using a variety of strategies.

<u>Warm-Up/Engage</u> 5 min	Present your class with three different newspaper headlines. Ask the class to state the five Ws (who, what, where, when, why).
<u>Activate</u>	Distribute newspapers to the class. Allow the students time to skim through a couple of articles and choose one they like. Then ask the students to identify the five Ws in their article. Next, ask the students to pair off and create a scene using that article as a basis for discussion. Students can first improvise the scene, then script it. The scenes should not re-create the newspaper story but discuss the newspaper story. Students should make definite choices for characterization and location. Give students ample time to rehearse their scenes and then present them to the class.
<u>Analysis</u>	Discuss how the media can be a tool for creating dramatic work. After viewing <i>The Dumb Waiter</i> , ask students to recall a scene from the media... In <i>The Dumb Waiter</i> , who read the story and who reacted to it? How was the discussion of newspaper stories a reflection of the relationship between Gus and Ben? Why does Gus choose those particular stories to read to Ben?

The Dumb Waiter: Post-Show Discussion Questions (page 1 of 1)

1. Michael Hanrahan and Stuart Hughes appear in the double bill *The Zoo Story* and *The Dumb Waiter*. Consider and discuss the challenges and demands this back-to-back structure creates.
2. What is the significance of the title of *The Dumb Waiter*?
3. What is a dumb waiter? What is the function of the dumb waiter in the play?
4. What is the relationship between Ben and Gus? Who is the more senior partner? How do we as an audience learn who is more senior?
5. What is subtext? Can you describe the subtext in a scene from *The Dumb Waiter*?
6. Where does the play take place? What do the characters do for a living? Who is their boss?
7. What are the characters waiting for?
8. How does this play end? What is resolved? What is left unresolved?
9. In the confrontation during the last scene, one of the characters has a gun. Who is it? Does the gun go off?
10. Pinter chooses to end his play in ambiguity. Neither character dies on stage. What is the significance of this choice?

The Zoo Story: About the Playwright (page 1 of 1)

Edward Albee was born on March 12, 1928, and was adopted by millionaire couple Reed and Frances Albee at the age of two weeks. Reed Albee was the son of Edward Franklin Albee, a rich and powerful early American Vaudeville producer. An only child, Edward grew up in a privileged household. His every wish was fulfilled and his life consisted of private tutors, servants, chauffeurs and winter getaways. However, his adoptive parents were uncommunicative and cold, and his mother controlling. To her it was of utmost importance that Edward attend the “right” schools and associate with the “right” people. By age 20, Albee was estranged from his bourgeois family and had moved to New York’s Greenwich Village to live a bohemian life.

An inheritance from his grandmother allowed Albee to live in New York City, where he continued to write (with little success) and do odd jobs. After a period of depression, he challenged himself to write a play before his 30th birthday. Albee said: “I finished **The Zoo Story** in three weeks... everything in my life had led to this moment; the writing seemed to flow from some inner need and conviction... it was sort of an explosion and the words never stopped.” Rejected by several New York City publishers, *The Zoo Story* made its way to Europe, where it premiered on September 28, 1959 at the Schiller Theatre in Wensaff, Germany. Four months later it returned to New York City, paired with Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village. This marked the beginning of Albee’s prolific and outstanding career as a playwright. Recently (in 2004) Albee expanded *The Zoo Story* into a two-act play. At the age of 77, Edward Albee is not slowing down as he continues to write and teach.

Plays by Edward Albee: *The Zoo Story* (1958)
The Sandbox (1960)
The American Dream (1961)
Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962)
Tiny Alice (1964)
A Delicate Balance (1966)
Seascape (1975)
Three Tall Women (1991)
The Lorca Play (1995)
The Play About the Baby (1997)
The Occupant (2002)
The Goat, or Who is Sylvia? (2002)
Several novels adapted for the stage (1970s–1980s)

The Zoo Story: Background Information (page 1 of 1)

Themes

- Isolation of human existence in a world without God.
- Lack of communication between individuals.
- Dehumanization in a commercial world.
- Social disparity.
- Life without purpose or examination.
- Loneliness.

Characters

Peter: A plain-looking man in his early 40s who smokes a pipe and carries horn-rimmed glasses. His dress and manner are that of a younger man.

Jerry: A man in his late 30s, carelessly dressed, once muscular and handsome. He is weary.

Setting

A park bench in Central Park, New York City, in the present time on a sunny day.

Synopsis

Peter, a middle-class publishing executive who lives in ignorance of the world outside his married life, sits on a park bench, reading. Along comes Jerry, an isolated, disheartened man who is very troubled and probably mentally ill.

Jerry is desperate to have a meaningful conversation with another human being. He intrudes on Peter's peaceful state by interrogating him and forcing him to listen to his life story and the reason behind his visit to the New York Zoo.

The action is linear, unfolding in front of the audience in "real time". The elements of ironic humour and unrelenting dramatic suspense are brought to a climax when Jerry brings his victim down to his own savage level and initiates a shocking ending.

The Zoo Story: Post-Show Discussion Questions (page 1 of 1)

1. What does the title signify? Which character is most representative of a caged animal, i.e., living in a metaphorical zoo?
2. Jerry has a knife and Peter has a book. What is the playwright trying to achieve by giving the characters these specific props?
3. Jerry first calls Peter a vegetable, then changes his mind and calls him an animal. Why?
4. How are Jerry and Peter different? (Think of their socio-economic class, their careers and their family life.) How does Edward Albee emphasize these differences?
5. How are Jerry and Peter alike?
6. Having seen the play, how would you describe Albee's view of the world?
7. Describe how Jerry dies. Albee purposely makes the final moment of the play ambiguous; why does he make that choice?
8. What will Peter take away from this day in the park?
9. Absurdist playwrights rebelled against the traditional structures of theatre and created their own. What convention/institution would you like to rebel against, and what alternative would you offer?

Related Activities

1. www.artsalive.ca

Encourage students to explore [artsalive.ca](http://www.artsalive.ca) (English Theatre), go to the *activities* section and try *What Lies Beneath*. This is a good introduction to subtext. On [artsalive.ca](http://www.artsalive.ca) (French Theatre, English version), students can find out more about Theatre of the Absurd.

2. Abstract Painting

Bring an abstract painting to class and discuss it. How do you look at an abstract painting? What feelings and emotions does it evoke? Is it necessary to understand it? How are the reactions to abstract art similar to Theatre of the Absurd? What do these two art forms have in common? Consider the non-linear aspect of both art forms. Theatre of the Absurd and abstract painting are both non-literal, use metaphor, and are meant to evoke emotions. The focus is on emotional reactions rather than narrative. After discussing the various paintings with your class have the students divide into groups and create a tableaux to capture the essence of their painting.

3. *Come and Go* by Samuel Beckett

In the Drama textbook *Interpretation: Working with Scripts* by Charles J. Lundy and David W. Booth, you will find the script of Samuel Beckett's short play *Come and Go*, a perfect example of Theatre of the Absurd. Give students time to work with the script; encourage them to pay close attention to the very detailed stage directions, especially with regard to hand positioning. Have students perform it for each other. Discuss and elicit comments on interpretation, subtext, staging, choices and their effectiveness. What different emotions did each interpretation evoke? You can tie this in to the previous discuss on abstract painting by asking your students how they would paint *Come and Go*: what colours, textures and images would they use?

4. Research

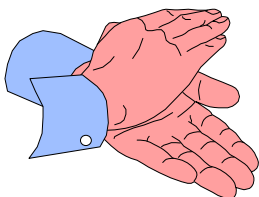
Edward Albee and Harold Pinter are extremely well-known playwrights. Critiques have been written about their plays, biographies have been written about their lives and essays have been written about their playwriting styles. Give students time to discover these playwrights by researching them. Ask students to share their newfound information with the class. The Internet is a good place to start and has a wealth of resources on both playwrights.



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. *The Zoo Story* and *The Dumb Waiter* 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 a 15-minute intermission between the presentation of these two one-act plays.



Production Photos



The Dumb Waiter



The Zoo Story

(left to right: Stuart Hughes, Michael Hanrahan)
photos by Guntar Kravis

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*NAC English Theatre High School Matinées are
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