

FROM THE CREATORS OF THE TONY® AWARD-WINNING MUSICAL *RAGTIME*

A MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

BOOK
BY **TERRENCE MCNALLY**

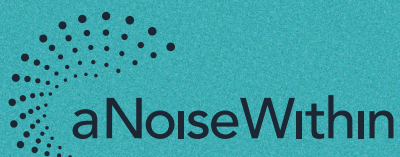
MUSIC
BY **STEPHEN FLAHERTY**

LYRICS
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BASED ON
A FILM "A MAN OF NO IMPORTANCE"

DIRECTED
BY **JULIA RODRIGUEZ-ELLIOTT**

MAY 4-JUNE 1, 2025



Dear School Partner,

Welcome to A Noise Within Theatre! We are thrilled to welcome you to the 2024-25 season—a season that we like to call **True Grit**—with stories that delve into the depths of tenacity and determination. In *A Man of No Importance*, an amateur theater director programs a controversial play that spurs discord within his traditional Irish Catholic community, posing the essential question: *how do we find the strength to accept our truest selves, even in the face of adversity?*

In this study guide, you will find articles, classroom activities, behind-the-scenes interviews, and other exciting materials, all crafted to align with the Common Core and the California VAPA Standards. This study guide can be enjoyed by teachers and students alike, our hope being that teachers and students enjoy it together!

We offer this study guide as a free resource for contextualizing the show and drawing parallels with our modern world, and you can find guides from our past seasons available for download on our website.

We hope this study guide will prepare you to enjoy the show to its fullest potential and to create a lasting memory of a fantastic day at the theatre. We are happy to have you!

Warmly,

A Noise Within Education



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Credits

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A Man of No Importance

Major Characters:

Alfie Byrne: A conductor on a public bus, and an amateur theatre director in Dublin, Ireland.

Robbie Fay: The bus driver, and Alfie's friend.

Lily Byrne: Alfie's unmarried sister, who lives with him.

William Carney: A butcher who lives downstairs from the Byrnes. He is a suitor to Lily.

Adele Price: A young woman with a mysterious past.

Additional Characters:

Carson: A supervisor with the Dublin bus service.

The St. Imelda Players: Mrs. Grace, Mrs. Curtin, Baldy, Rasher, Miss Crowe, Ernie.

Oscar Wilde: An Irish playwright of the previous century whose life and works inspire Alfie.

Others: Father Kenny, Peter, Mrs. Patrick, Kitty, Robbie's friends, the "Breton Beret," Sully, the Monsignor, and more.



Former Huddersfield trolleybus 541, owned by the National Trolleybus Association. Creative Commons.

Play Synopsis

Act 1:

The play is set in **Dublin, Ireland, in 1964**. **Alfie Byrne, a conductor on a public bus**, stands in the social hall of St. Imelda's Church, grieving because the amateur acting troupe that he created (the St. Imelda's Players) has been shut down. He is joined by Father Kenny, and then by the St. Imelda's Players themselves, who inform Alfie that they will perform a play that tells the backstory of what happened.



Church of the Immaculate Conception, Barrack Street.

The characters take their seats on Alfie's bus and introduce themselves ("A Man of No Importance"). Alfie informs them that they will be performing Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. We meet Robbie Fay, the bus driver, and Adele Rice, a mysterious newcomer. Alfie immediately decides that she is the perfect *Salome* for his show.

Alfie returns home to the apartment that he shares with his sister, Lily. She is initially overjoyed to hear about Adele, thinking that Alfie has a romantic interest in her. When Alfie denies this, Lily laments that she cannot marry until Alfie

marries, and she feels that life is passing her by ("The Burden of Life"). Alfie then visits the butcher shop and speaks with the butcher, Michael Carney, a suitor to Lily and an avid amateur actor. Carney, Alfie, and eventually the entire acting troupe sing about the thrill of acting ("Going Up"). Back on the bus the next day, Alfie persuades Adele to play *Salome* ("Princess").

Alfie reassures Father Kenny of St. Imelda's Church that there is nothing offensive in Wilde's *Salome*. The actors arrive full of enthusiasm ("First Rehearsal"). Later, Alfie tries to convince Robbie to join the troupe, but Robbie steadfastly refuses ("The Streets of Dublin"). Alfie agrees to accompany Robbie to the pub. Once there, however, he feels out of place. A sleazy character, the "Breton Beret," approaches Alfie in a way that makes him uncomfortable, so he quickly leaves.

Play Synopsis *continued*

Meanwhile, Lily and Carney are drinking and discussing Alfie. Both are suspicious that he's hiding something in his locked room ("Books"). We then see Alfie in his room, looking in the mirror, in which he sees both himself and the ghost of renowned Victorian playwright Oscar Wilde ("Man in the Mirror"), with whom he shares his deepest secret.

Rehearsals continue. Lily invites Adele to tea, hoping to encourage a romance between Adele and Alfie. Later, when Alfie walks Adele home, Adele tells Alfie a secret of her own, and Alfie responds with nonjudgmental kindness ("Love Who You Love"). As Alfie walks home by himself, he is approached again by the Breton Beret, whom he evades, only to be confronted by Oscar Wilde.

Act 2

Mrs. Patrick, who works at St. Imelda's Church, sings a hymn and is soon joined by other characters who provide background commentary while Alfie makes his weekly confession to Father Kenny ("Confession"). The churchgoers leave, and Alfie visits the cemetery, where he encounters Baldy, who is visiting the grave of his late wife, and the two men share a moment of warm friendship ("The Cuddles Mary Gave").

At rehearsal, Alfie patiently answers questions from the designers ("Art"). Shortly afterwards, Adele breaks down in tears and is unable to speak Salome's lines. The church members, led by Carney, share their suspicions of Alfie and of the play with the Monsignor ("A Man of No Importance," reprise). The Monsignor decides that *Salome* is obscene and declares that the show is canceled. Dejected, Alfie goes to the bus depot, where he discovers Robbie and Mrs. Patrick having a romantic encounter. She leaves, and Robbie tells Alfie not to judge him ("Love Who You Love," reprise).

Utterly discouraged, Alfie returns home. Looking in the mirror, he has a long conversation with Oscar Wilde ("Man in the Mirror," reprise). Alfie dresses to look like Wilde and heads to the local pub. He finds the Breton Beret, and the two head to a nearby alley, where Alfie is attacked and beaten. A policeman breaks up the fight just as Lily and Carney walk by. As they help Alfie up, the policeman reveals to them that Alfie is gay.

The next day Lily confronts Alfie ("Tell Me Why"). Alfie leaves for work, where his taunting supervisor, Carson, informs him that Robbie asked to be transferred to a different bus when he learned Alfie's secret. Adele arrives and tells Alfie that she is leaving for England ("Love Who You Love," reprise). Later, Alfie stands alone in the social hall of St. Imelda's and reflects bitterly on his life ("Welcome to the World"). He is interrupted by Robbie, who assures Alfie of his friendship and says that he wants to be in the play. They are quickly joined by the St. Imelda's players. Lily arrives with refreshments. Robbie reads a poem that Alfie hands him, and all the characters **affirm their friendship and commitment to Alfie.**

Authors



Terrence McNally. Wikimedia Commons.

Terrence McNally had a remarkably far-ranging career, including a new work on Broadway in each of the last six decades. In 2018 he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is a 2019 recipient of a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement. He also received the Dramatists Guild Lifetime Achievement Award and the Lucille Lortel Lifetime Achievement Award. He won four Tony Awards for his plays *Love! Valour! Compassion!* and *Master Class* and his musical books for *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *Ragtime*. He wrote a number of TV scripts, including “Andre’s Mother,” for which he won an Emmy Award. He received two Guggenheim Fellowships, a Rockefeller Grant, four Drama Desk Awards, two Lucille Lortel Awards, two Obie Awards, and three Hull-Warriner Awards from the Dramatists Guild. In 1996 he was inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame. He wrote the libretto for the operas *Great Scott* and *Dead Man Walking*, both with music by Jake Heggie. Other plays include *Mothers and Sons*; *Lips Together*; *Teeth Apart*; *The Lisbon Traviata*; *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*; *A Perfect Ganesh*; *The Visit*; *The Full Monty*; *Corpus Christi*; *Bad Habits*; *Next*; *The Ritz*; *Anastasia*; *It’s Only a Play*; *Where Has Tommy Flowers Gone?*; and *The Stendhal Syndrome*.



Ed F. Martin and Adrián González in *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, 2023 A Noise Within. Photo by Craig Schwartz

FUN FACTS ABOUT

A Man of No Importance

Terrence McNally also wrote the libretto for *Kiss of the Spider Woman* when it had its Broadway debut as a musical (the composer was John Kander and the lyrics were by Fred Ebb, the team that wrote *Cabaret* and *Chicago*). A Noise Within performed the two-character play *Kiss of the Spider Woman* in 2023.

Authors *continued*

Lynn Ahrens won Tony, Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle Awards and received two Grammy nominations for Broadway's *Ragtime*. For Twentieth Century Fox's animated feature film *Anastasia*, she was nominated for two Academy Awards and two Golden Globes. She and longtime collaborator Stephen Flaherty received the Oscar Hammerstein Award for Lifetime Achievement, and in 2015 they were inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame. Broadway: *Anastasia*; *Once On This Island* (Olivier Award, Best Musical; Tony nominations, Best Book and Score); *Seussical* (Grammy nomination); *My Favorite Year*; *Chita Rivera: The Dancer's Life*; *Rocky*; *Madison Square Garden's A Christmas Carol*; *Ragtime* (2010 Broadway revival). Off-Broadway and regional: Lincoln Center Theater's *Dessa Rose*, *The Glorious Ones* (both Drama Desk-nominated) and *A Man of No Importance* (Outer Critics Circle Award, Best Musical); *Lucky Stiff*; *Little Dancer* (Kennedy Center world premiere). Film and television credits include *A Christmas Carol* (NBC-TV); *Camp* (IFC Films); *Schoolhouse Rock* (ABC-TV) and others. (Emmy Award and four Emmy nominations). She is a Council member of the Dramatists Guild of America, a co-founder of the Dramatists Guild Fellows Program, and a Lilly Award winner for Lyrics.

www.ahrensandflaherty.com

STEPHEN FLAHERTY is the composer of the Broadway musicals *Ragtime* (Tony, Drama Desk, OCC Awards, two Grammy nominations), *Seussical* (Grammy, Drama Desk nominations), *Once on This Island* (Tony nomination, Olivier Award, Best Musical) and *Rocky*. Additional Broadway includes *Chita Rivera: The Dancer's Life* (original songs) and Neil Simon's *Proposals* (incidental music). Stephen has also written four musicals at Lincoln Center Theatre: *The Glorious Ones* (OCC, Drama Desk nominations), *Dessa Rose* (OCC, Drama Desk nominations), *A Man of No Importance* (OCC, Best Musical, Drama Desk nomination) and *My Favorite Year*. Other theater includes *In Your Arms* (Old Globe), *Little Dancer* (Kennedy Center), *Lucky Stiff* (Playwrights Horizons) and *Loving Repeating: A Musical of Gertrude Stein* (Chicago's Jefferson Award, Best New Musical.) Film includes *Anastasia* (two Academy Award and two Golden Globe nominations), the documentary *After The Storm* and *Lucky Stiff*. Mr. Flaherty's concert music has premiered at the Hollywood Bowl, Boston's Symphony Hall, Carnegie Hall, the Guggenheim Museum and Symphony Space. This year celebrates Stephen's 32-year collaboration with lyricist-librettist Lynn Ahrens. Stephen and Lynn are members of the Dramatists Guild Council and co-founders of the Dramatists Guild Fellows Program. In 2015 they were inducted into the Theater Hall Of Fame. Upcoming: the stage adaptation of *Anastasia*. www.AhrensAndFlaherty.com.

Themes & Motifs

Homophobia: Alfie Byrne is a deeply closeted gay man living in 1960's Dublin. He is barely able to acknowledge even to himself that he is gay because of the intense homophobia of the society and the time in which he lives. Catholicism was not merely the dominant religion in Ireland at that time; the Catholic Church's beliefs and restrictions also dictated the broader social attitudes and judgments of Irish society as a whole. Alfie's Catholic faith has taught him that homosexuality is a sin, and he has internalized that belief to the point where he is so ashamed and guilty that he cannot even reveal his secret during his weekly Confession. Catholics believe that Confession of sins allows for the priest to tell the believer what to do to atone for that sin (for example, say a certain number of prayers each day), so Alfie's inability to confess the "sin" of his sexual orientation shows that he is convinced that there is no possibility of atonement and forgiveness.

Tolerance and Acceptance: Every character in *A Man of No Importance* is presented with the opportunity to become more accepting of people's differences, though not every character chooses to do so. The choice is certainly a difficult one in the setting of 1964 Dublin because of the strong influence of the Catholic Church, which taught rigid intolerance when it came to certain differences. The characters in the play who choose to practice acceptance (rather than judgment and rejection) find themselves sharing a warm sense of community by the play's ending. Moreover, the play also suggests that it's not always enough to accept the differences that we see in other people; tolerance and acceptance of others must begin with acceptance of oneself, as Alfie and others learn. The sense of shared humanity that results from nonjudgmental acceptance provides the foundation not only for warm friendship and community, but for creativity and art as well.

Oscar Wilde: Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was an Irish playwright, critic, literary man, and London celebrity. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and then at Oxford in England. His so-called "drawing-room comedies," which often hid keen social critiques underneath witty dialogue, made Wilde the toast of



Green Carnation. Wikimedia Commons.

Themes & Motifs *continued*



Gertrude Hoffmann, Salome Dance No. 7. Creative Commons.

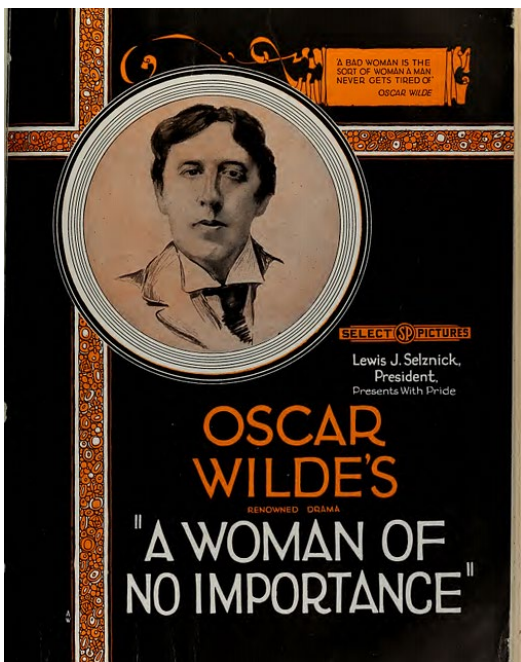
London in the 1890's. These comedies include *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and *An Ideal Husband*. Wilde's personal life was marred by tragedy when he was tried for "gross indecency" (that is, homosexuality) and sentenced to two years hard labor. After his release from prison, Wilde immediately moved to France, where he died of health complications from his imprisonment and the effects of alcoholism.

Salome: Many versions exist of the story of Salome. In the New Testament, she is the unnamed stepdaughter of King Herod Antipas. Salome performs a dance for King Herod that pleases him so much that he promises to give her whatever she asks for. After consulting with her mother, Herodias, who bears a grudge against St. John the Baptist, Salome asks for the head of St. John the Baptist, and Herod reluctantly grants her wish. Beginning in Medieval times, Christian tradition held that she was a seductive temptress, and her dance ("The Dance of the Seven Veils") was a popular subject for artists for many centuries. Oscar Wilde's 1893 play *Salome* was written in French and was first performed in Paris, because plays concerning Biblical characters were forbidden to be performed in Britain.

Themes & Motifs *continued*

The Power of Theatre: One of the central themes of the play is the idea of the power of theater, and particularly the power of theater to create community and to foster empathy and kindness. Alfie is the driving force behind the St. Imelda's Players, and even though the more judgmental members of the church community condemn Alfie once his secret is revealed, the players themselves rally around him. The players clearly miss the experience of being in community together, but more significantly, they have come to appreciate Alfie, and to realize what he brings to them, both individually and collectively, and how he enriches their lives with art.

Family Relationships: Alfie lives with his sister, Lily, who feels such a commitment to him that she believes she cannot marry (which would compel her to move out and leave Alfie alone) before Alfie is married. Lily is becoming increasingly embittered as she feels that life is passing her by, yet when Alfie's secret is revealed she stands by him (although Alfie at first does not recognize this).



FUN FACTS ABOUT

A Man of No Importance

The title *A Man of No Importance* references that of an Oscar Wilde play, *A Woman of No Importance* (1893). Wilde's play is one of his so-called "drawing-room comedies," which on the surface seem to be lighthearted comedies in which the characters exchange a lot of witty remarks, but which are, in reality, works of keen social satire.

Getarchive.net

Who Is Alfie Byrne?

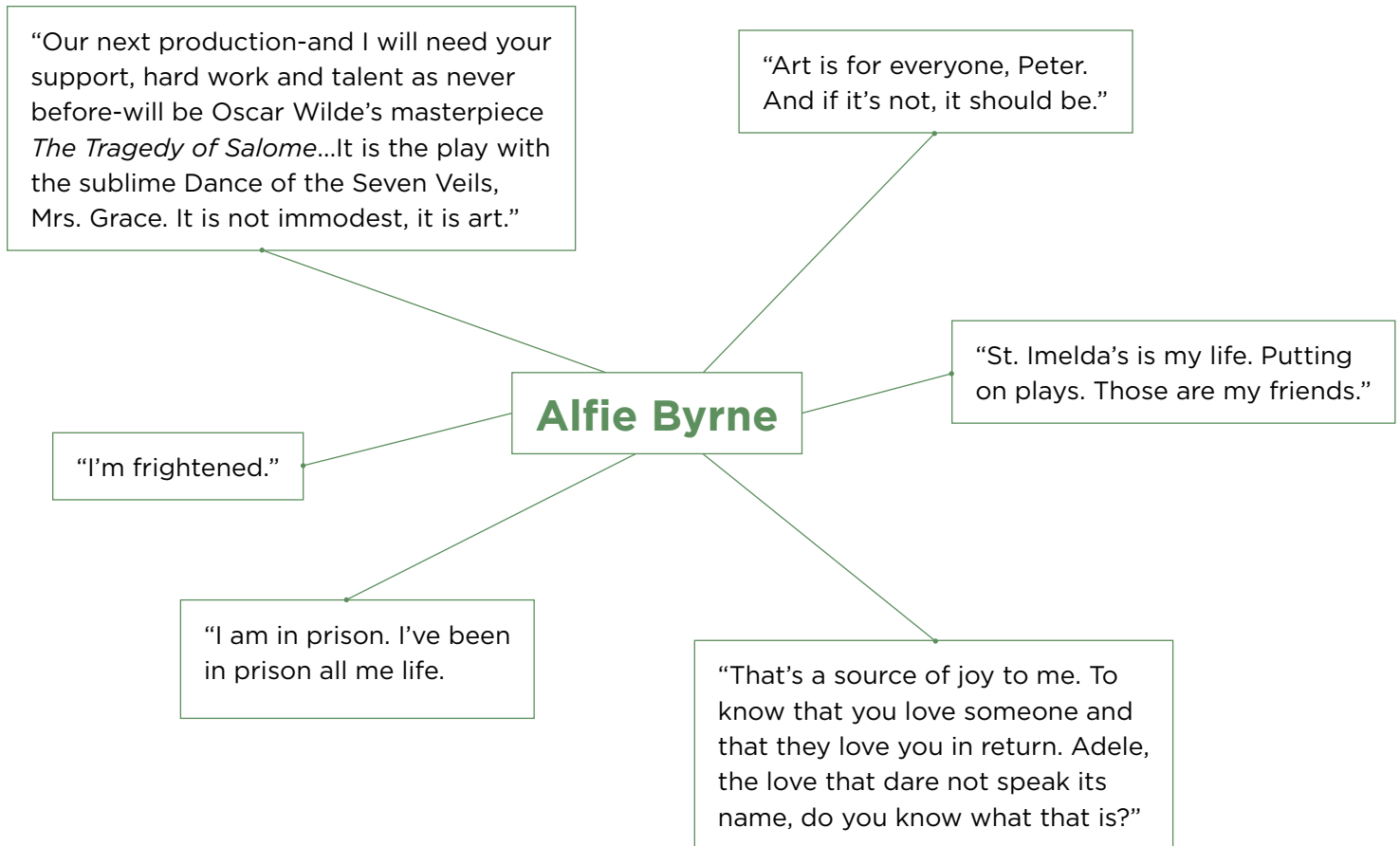
ACTIVITY

Objective

Explore the role of Alfie using script excerpts and writing prompts.

Step 1: Who is Alfie Byrne?

The year is 1964! Alfie Byrne, Irish bus conductor and director of amateur theatre troupe St. Imelda's Players, begins rehearsals for his controversial play. What can you learn about Alfie from some of his lines below?



Step 2: What about Alfie Byrne?

- What kind of person would you describe Alfie to be? Why?
- What kind of emotions does Alfie feel?
- What celebrity would play Alfie in a film?
- What animal best describes Alfie?

Who Is Alfie Byrne? *continued*

Step 3: Write to Alfie Byrne

Alfie has just learned that his beloved production of *The Tragedy of Salome* has been cancelled by the church. What would you say to console him? Write him a letter below.

Terrence McNally and “The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name”



Oscar Wilde 1889. Wikimedia Commons.



The prison cell of Oscar Wilde in Reading Gaol, England. Wikimedia Commons.

Playwright Terrence McNally (1938-2020) has often been described as “the Bard of American theater.” His award-winning works, which he wrote over a period of more than sixty years, include plays, librettos, screenplays, and more. McNally’s writings covered many genres, including satire, comedy, and tragedy. Yet as many reviewers have observed, McNally’s work became more poignant and nuanced in the wake of the AIDS crisis in the early 1980’s.

In a 2019 *New York Times* profile of McNally, the interviewer, Phillip Galanes, writes that McNally’s later and arguably best works explore “the longing for human connection and the fears that stand in its way.” Many of McNally’s later plays and librettos (including those for *A Man of No Importance*) focus on the enormous challenges that gay men, in particular, have faced when compelled to search for that love and connection secretly because of the homophobic and repressive societies in which they live. And as a gay man himself, McNally understood those challenges all too well.

Both the musical adaptation of *A Man of No Importance* and the 1994 film on which the show is based revolve around the struggles of Alfie Byrne, a deeply closeted gay man living in 1960’s Ireland. Alfie is a bus conductor who regales his passengers with recitations of his favorite poems, but his true passion is directing amateur theatricals, especially the works of Oscar Wilde. Alfie channels his most powerful emotions into these shows, for in them he is able to express the deepest yearnings of his soul—yearnings that he barely acknowledges even to himself, and that his Catholic faith and the relentless homophobia of 1960’s Ireland force him to hide.

Alfie’s affection for the works of Oscar Wilde is no accident. Wilde was himself born in Dublin, though he lived primarily in England and France during

Terrence McNally and “The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name” *continued*

his adult life, and he achieved his greatest successes with the plays he wrote for the London stage. A brilliant and complex figure, Wilde led a flamboyant life but was also a hard worker and a prolific writer. Nevertheless, he is best remembered for his many witticisms, and, tragically, for having been tried and found guilty of “gross indecency” (that is, homosexuality, which was criminalized in Victorian England) and sentenced to two years hard labor in British jails. Wilde’s delicate health was destroyed as a result of his imprisonment, and he died an impoverished alcoholic three years after his release.

Wilde’s terrible final years could in theory have been avoided. Although he had been romantically involved with several younger men over the years, including during the years when he was married to his wife, his affair with Lord Alfred Douglas (nicknamed “Bosie” by his family and friends) proved Wilde’s undoing. Douglas’s father, the Marquess of Queensbury, accused Wilde of being gay, and Wilde sued Queensbury for libel (that is, making false and slanderous statements about someone). Private investigators hired by Queensbury confirmed Wilde’s encounters with young male prostitutes - some of whom testified against him. Wilde lost the trial against Queensbury, and he was then arrested himself, tried, and convicted for the “crime” of homosexuality. The courtroom exchange



FUN FACTS ABOUT

A Man of No Importance

The practice of wearing a green carnation as a symbol of LGBTQ identity began in Paris and was popularized by Oscar Wilde, who asked a small group of his friends to wear one to the opening of his play *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1892. Although there is no mention of a green carnation in the movie version of *A Man of No Importance*, in the promotional poster for the film, the leading actor, Albert Finney, is shown holding a green carnation.

Terrence McNally and “The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name” *continued*

that sealed Wilde’s fate occurred when the prosecution asked Wilde to explain the phrase “the love that dare not speak its name,” which appears in the last line of a poem by Bosie written in 1892. As almost everyone in the courtroom knew, Bosie was referring to homosexual love between men, and the prosecution was attempting to compel Wilde to admit this. Wilde’s eloquent defense of that love as noble, intellectual, and natural elicited cheers (and hisses) from those in the courtroom, but it was not enough to win him an acquittal.

Although Oscar Wilde does not appear in the 1994 movie *A Man of No Importance*, he features prominently in the musical, appearing to Alfie several times, conversing with him, and encouraging him to be true to himself. Alfie affectionately addresses Robbie Fay, the bus driver, as Bosie, and the play concludes with Robbie reading aloud a stanza from Wilde’s poem “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (that is, Reading Jail, where Wilde spent part of his imprisonment).

Terrence McNally brings a deep compassion to his portrayal of Alfie that was born out of his own lived experience. And like Alfie, McNally also understood the power of theater to cultivate empathy and to encourage a sense of our shared humanity. At the end of the *NYT* interview, McNally observes: “I believe that people’s nervous systems are more open to emotion in the theater with their fellow human beings. When a play is going well, the audience breathes as one...because they’re getting this from other live people. And that doesn’t happen watching Netflix.... People are in the theater for one reason: to hear this story and meet the people in it. That’s a human need. If you want to change minds, write a great editorial for the Op-Ed page. But if you want to get people to *feel* differently, reach them through the theater.” It is our ability to feel differently, and especially to feel more empathically towards other people who may be unlike us in some ways, that leads us back to a sense of our shared humanity and, eventually, to a kinder, more compassionate world for all of us.

Objective

Use theatre games to build a sense of ensemble and trust.

Build Your Theatre Ensemble

At its core, theatre relies on ensemble. Theatre is rarely something that can be done alone; it almost always requires a group of people united by a common goal. To build a strong ensemble, you must cultivate trust and collaboration—and often a theatre group does this by playing games! In *A Man of No Importance*, protagonist Alfie Byrne works hard to cultivate a strong sense of community within his theatre ensemble, the St. Imelda's Players. Can your class take on the games below to explore the true meaning of ensemble?

Level 1: Pass the Clap

Everyone stands in a circle. Silently, one person turns to the person on their left and makes eye contact. When eyes are locked, they must clap together once at the exact same moment—without talking! The recipient then turns to the person on *their* left and repeats the action, thus 'passing the clap.' The clap must pass all the way around the circle. Once mastered, see if your ensemble can pass the clap around the circle faster and faster and faster.

Discussion: How were you able to communicate without the use of words?

Level 2: Stop Go Hop

This game requires a medium to large empty space. Have participants walk around the space at a moderate pace, allowing their arms to rest gently at their sides. When the leader calls 'STOP,' everyone must freeze as quickly and stealthily as possible. When the leader calls 'GO,' everyone can resume walking. When the leader calls 'HOP,' everyone must hop once and continue to walk. Once mastered, the leader should allow the ensemble to try executing STOP, GO, and HOP without verbal cues. They must use body awareness and listening to STOP, GO, and HOP as an ensemble.

Discussion: Did you notice if you were more of a leader or a follower in this game? How can you challenge yourself to try being more of the opposite?

Build Your Theatre Ensemble *continued*

Level 3: Town Hall

Select a category with four options, such as seasons. Define each corner of the room as Winter, Spring, Summer, or Fall. Participants must go to the corner that represents the category they love the most. Each newly formed group must elect a representative who will then take center stage and argue why Winter, Spring, Summer, or Fall is the best season. Each corner must advocate for itself at the Town Hall! Repeat with other categories, such as cuisine, times of day, or streaming platforms. No one can play representative twice!

Discussion: What similarities did you discover between yourself and other members of the ensemble? Did any of those similarities surprise you?



Music Tells the Story in *A Man of No Importance*

It may seem surprising that when the 1994 film *A Man of No Importance* was adapted for Broadway in 2002, it was reimagined as a musical. But there are many reasons why the plot, themes, and setting of the movie lend themselves readily to a musical adaptation. The team behind the musical version—lyricist Lynn Ahrens, composer Stephen Flaherty, and librettist Terrence McNally—were able to explore certain ideas more fully and even develop new ones through the songs and the music that they used to tell the story of Alfie Byrne, a Dublin bus conductor who is devoted to amateur theatricals and is living with a painful secret.

Some of the surprise we may feel upon learning that this sensitive, touching film was adapted into a musical may be caused by the word “musical” itself. When most of us think of a musical, we think specifically of a big Broadway musical: a large cast, show-stopping songs, big choral numbers, and a lot of enthusiastic and athletic dancing. But *A Man of No Importance* can more accurately be described as a “play with music.” Although no formal definition exists, in general we can say that a play with music takes place on a reduced scale than that of a musical. The cast is much smaller; most of the songs are solos or duets; and there is (usually) no dancing. Furthermore, in a musical the song and dance numbers almost always interrupt the action of the show, while in a play with music, the music and the singing help to tell the story and are therefore an essential part of the narrative.

A play with music typically takes place on a smaller emotional scale as well, though not because this type of show doesn’t address complex or painful emotions. Instead, a play with music focuses more deeply on the nuanced emotional challenges experienced by a single character, while most musicals try to convey the emotions of several characters (each of whom may get just one big solo number to express what they’re feeling). In *A*



Music Tells the Story in *A Man of No Importance* continued

Man of No Importance, Alfie goes on a difficult emotional journey and brings us along with him, every step of the way; and while occasionally a Broadway musical is able to present characters fully, in all their emotional richness (*Hamilton* is one example), most musicals have a different focus.

Another important reason why the movie *A Man of No Importance* evolved naturally into a play with music is the setting in Dublin, the capital city of Ireland. Ireland has a rich, centuries-old tradition of music and song, and this tradition remains hugely important to the Irish and their sense of national identity to this day. Nowhere is this tradition more strongly maintained than in Dublin, which is the musical and theatrical capital of Ireland as well. Ireland suffered centuries of harshness, poverty, and oppression at the hands of the British and other invaders; yet throughout these hardships, music and song offered a means for the suffering people to express both their grief and their hopes that better times might lie ahead. Interestingly, Barry Devlin, the screenwriter of the 1994 movie, is an Irish musician, as well as a screenwriter and director, and his film script resonates with the musicality of Irish speech (which echoes Gaelic, the earliest language spoken in Ireland).

More recently, another story about music and love that is also set in Dublin made a successful transition from movie to a play with music: the 2007 movie *Once*, which takes place during one week and describes the love story of an Irish street musician and a young Czech immigrant. Because the narrative of the movie centers around music, it evolved very naturally into a play with music (also titled *Once*) that premiered on Broadway in 2012 and toured internationally for many years afterwards. The couple in that story (identified simply as Guy and Girl) face different challenges than those that confront Alfie Byrne, and in the end they go their separate ways. But, like Alfie, their lives are much richer for having loved one another and for their shared experience, and like Alfie they step back into their individual lives with a renewed sense of hope for the future. Similarly, Alfie's true friends learn important lessons about not being too quick to judge others, and everyone realizes that this humble bus conductor is, in fact, a man of great importance to everyone whose lives he touches, with literature, with song, and with simple human kindness.

A Conversation with the Scenic Designer

We sat down with *A Man of No Importance* Scenic Designer François-Pierre Couture to ask him some questions about how a scenic design comes to life!

How did you land in Scenic Design? Did you think you would pursue Scenic Design back when you were in high school?

I have always been interested in the visual arts, particularly drawing and painting, and more recently, in performance art. However, my educational path led me to business school. Halfway through my first year, I realized it wasn't the right fit for me. I dropped out of the program and took a year off to explore the arts further—though the idea terrified me!

During that year, I explored various programs, spoke with different artists, and eventually discovered scenic design, which seemed to combine both of my interests. I was captivated by how space could be used for visual storytelling through the body and objects. I applied to several universities and was accepted into Concordia University's scenic design program, despite having no idea what I was doing at the time. While I was a skilled visual artist, I had much to learn about the performing arts.

After three years at Concordia, I applied to graduate school in the U.S. and was accepted to UCLA, where I completed my Master's in Scenic and Lighting Design.

***A Man of No Importance* is set in Dublin, Ireland. How are you bringing that city alive in your design? Have you been to Dublin?**

I have never been to Dublin, aside from a layover at the airport. As designers, we often travel through time and space vicariously via research—books, images, movies, and more. In this case, most of the play takes place in the social hall of St. Imelda's in the 1960s,



Scenic Designer François-Pierre Couture

FUN FACTS ABOUT

A Man of No Importance

A Man of No Importance is a play with music (as opposed to a musical). Another example of a play with music is *Animal Farm*, a dramatic adaptation of George Orwell's 1945 novella, by Peter Hall, composer Richard Peaslee, and lyricist Adrian Mitchell. A Noise Within produced *Animal Farm* in 2022.

A Conversation with the Scenic Designer *continued*

which could be a simple and perhaps austere design, with religious tones and “dusty corners.” However, I did not want to set the play strictly within its historical context. The characters are colorful in their own ways, the places are subtly magical, and we can feel the humble dreams and hopes of each of them. Therefore, it was important to highlight the religious overtones through iconography while also using symmetry to reflect the conservative values portrayed in the script.

The set itself is minimal. Its series of arches echoes both the church’s hall and the architecture of the theater itself. The director and I have established key scenic elements that will be reused or transformed to metaphorically represent the play’s many different locations. I strongly believe in leaving room for the audience’s imagination to fill in the intentional “gaps.”

Our production of *A Man of No Importance* at A Noise Within is drawing particular inspiration from the work of filmmaker Wes Anderson, who directed famous films such as *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. How is the distinct visual style of Wes Anderson influencing your design?

I am a big fan of Wes Anderson’s movies—colors like cyan, magenta, and yellow, striking yet subtle patterns, and the use of symmetry. Interestingly enough, this idea came to me almost unconsciously. As I mentioned earlier, the characters are colorful and somewhat quirky, but also kind and gentle (for the most part). Even though the play deals with serious topics, it handles them gently, unlike *Sweeney Todd*, which is much more visceral.



Left to right: Moonrise Kingdom Poster. The Grand Budapest Hotel. Flickr.com

The design itself follows these principles: arches and a window frame the playing space, and the color choices are simple and stylized. The space begins with realism but quickly transforms to metaphorically represent the different locations of the play.

I believe the simplicity of the surfaces and colors reflects the humbleness of the characters, who are working-class people finding joy in the simple pleasures of staging a play.

A Conversation with the Scenic Designer *continued*



Two of François-Pierre's set renderings for *A Man of No Importance*.

What advice would you give a young person interested in pursuing Scenic Design?

I would suggest starting by going to the theater, museums, amusement parks—anything live. Take mental notes of the design. What did you like? What intrigued you? Then, be curious!

The next step is to perhaps take a few classes at a community college, volunteer at a theater, and don't be shy—ask if you can observe technical rehearsals of a play. Inquire if there are Q&A sessions with designers.

Designing is not a straight path. Some people are more focused on the artistic process, others prefer the technical challenges, or sometimes, both. Find what interests you and start digging.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had a moment where you felt like you needed to **hide something about yourself**? What did you learn from that experience?
2. Alfie is determined to put on his play with the St. Imelda's Players. What **resistance** does Alfie experience in the mounting of this play? Does he experience resistance elsewhere?
3. **Oscar Wilde** appears to Alfie a few times throughout the play. What do Oscar Wilde and Alfie have in common?
4. At one point, **Adele** advises Alfie to "**go after what you want.**" How does her advice shape Alfie's decisions, especially when it comes to his feelings for Robbie and his dream of directing the play?
5. The members of St. Imelda's Players come together through their shared **love of theatre**. How does the act of rehearsing a play create a **sense of community** among them?
6. Do you think Alfie's fear of rejection is something that happens in real life to people who identify as **LGBTQ+**? Why or why not? How can we create more supportive environments for people to be open about their identities?



Photo: Kasey Mahaffy by Daniel Reichert.

Bonus Material

What to go deeper? ANW Resident Dramaturg Miranda Johnson-Haddad has some recommendations.

Film & Television:

- Here's the trailer for the 1994 movie on which the musical is based: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soWVMrp250U>
- The movie itself is on Amazon, probably elsewhere too. The amazing cast includes Albert Finney, Brenda Fricker, Tara Fitzgerald, Michael Gambon, and Rufus Sewell.
- PBS has an American Masters episode/movie on Terrence McNally; here's the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5QDxeKdEcY>
- An excellent 2018 production of Oscar Wilde's 1893 play *A Woman of No Importance* is available on Marquee TV (which offers a seven-day free trial period). The production stars Eve Best (familiar to many from the HBO series *House of the Dragon*) and Anne Reid and is directed by Dominic Dromgoole. It was performed at Classic Spring Theatre Company. Here's the trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JszOPk8OuGI>
- And here's the theatre's summary of Wilde's play: "An earnest young American woman, a louche English lord, and an innocent young chap join a house party of fin de siècle fools and grotesques. Nearby a woman lives, cradling a long-buried secret. First performed in 1893, Oscar Wilde's marriage of glittering wit and Ibsenite drama satirized the socially conservative world of the Victorian upper-class, creating a vivid new theatrical voice which still resonates today."
- The 2018 movie *The Happy Prince* is a biopic about Oscar Wilde. It stars Rupert Everett, who also directed the film, as well as Colin Firth, Emily Watson, Tom Wilkinson, and others. [Note: The film received an R rating.]
- An earlier biopic, *Wilde* (1997), stars Stephen Fry, Jude Law, Jennifer Ehle, Vanessa Redgrave, and (again) Tom Wilkinson.
- The 2002 movie version of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* stars Colin Firth, Rupert Everett, Reese Witherspoon, Judi Dench, and (yet again) Tom Wilkinson.

Bonus Material *continued*

Online Video Resources:

- Here's a brief clip of Jim Parsons on a talk show, discussing the Dublin accent he adopted (or, as he charmingly describes, struggled to adopt) when he played Alfie in the 2022 Revival at Classic Stage Company in New York City: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrTjKG7jX2E>
- Here's a brief (and uplifting) interview with Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens (the composer and lyricist) discussing the musical: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wy_n-TAyvkQ

Text Resources:

- For a *New York Times* profile of Terrence McNally by Phillip Galanes, see: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/10/t-magazine/terrence-mcnally-interview.html>
- Here's the link to the text of Wilde's *Salome* (along with the illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley that accompanied the first edition) on Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/42704/pg42704-images.html>

ABOUT

A Noise Within

A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.



aNoiseWithin
Classic Theatre, Modern Magic

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