
OCTOBER 4-NOVEMBER 1, 2026



COME FROM AWAY

BOOK, MUSIC AND LYRICS BY

IRENE SANKOFF & DAVID HEIN



Dear School Partner,

Welcome to A Noise Within Theatre! We are thrilled to welcome you to the 35th Anniversary Season—a season in which we look to **Those Better Angels**—a theme inspired by Lincoln's call to our best selves. In *Come From Away*, an abrupt tragedy brings a community of unassuming small-town locals into sudden contact with a mass of international displaced visitors, posing the essential question: *what does kindness look like in crisis?*

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

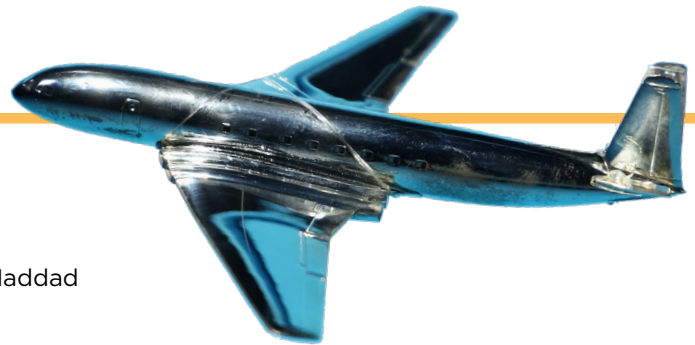


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Character Map



The Newfoundland Locals

Did You Know?

All twelve actors in *Come From Away* play several roles, doubling both as Newfoundland locals and as “come from aways.”

CLAUDE

The friendly and well-liked Mayor of Gander, Newfoundland. He has never had to deal with a crisis of this magnitude before.

BONNIE

A no-nonsense mother of three, Bonnie is the head of the Gander SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), and she is deeply concerned about the plight of the animals on the planes.

DOUG

An Air Traffic Controller, married to Bonnie. He tries to help his wife and the animals that are stranded on the airplanes.

BEULAH

The head of the Gander Legion, a veterans’ support organization. She has a son who is a firefighter.

OZ

The quirky constable in the two-person Gander police force.

JANICE

An eager young local TV reporter. September 11 is her first day on the job

ANNETTE

A teacher at the Gander Academy.

GARTH

The head of the local bus drivers’ union.

Character Map *continued*

The Come From Aways

BEVERLEY

An airplane pilot. She is the first female captain for American Airlines.

HANNAH

The mother of a firefighter in Manhattan, Hannah waits for news about her son.

DIANE

A divorcee from Texas who is terrified that her son may have been flying at the time of the attacks.

NICK

An English oil engineer who finds himself falling for Diane.

KEVIN T.

The head of an environmental energy company in Los Angeles, Kevin was on vacation with his boyfriend (and secretary, also named Kevin) when they are stranded in Gander.



KEVIN J.

Kevin's boyfriend and secretary. Sarcastic and unhappy, he wants to leave Gander as soon as possible.

BOB

A hardened New Yorker, Bob is initially suspicious of where he's landed and of the locals he encounters, but he is quickly won over by their kindness.

ALI

An Egyptian and practicing Muslim. He is treated with suspicion by law enforcement, by the airline, and by some of the other passengers.



Photo by Abe Portillo.

COME FROM AWAY

The Story Behind the Play



The play tells the true story of what happened on September 11, 2001, when 38 airplanes from the United States and around the world were abruptly diverted to Gander, a small town on an island in Newfoundland, Canada, after U.S. airspace was closed. When seven thousand passengers

disembarked from these planes, the town's population almost doubled in an instant. In the wake of the terrible acts of terrorism on September 11, the stranded passengers, to their surprise, found their faith in humanity restored by the kindhearted and accepting people of Gander, who welcomed them to the island and comforted those who had "come from away."



Grounded aircraft at Gander Airport during 9/11.
Courtesy Gander Airport Historical Society.

The story that the play tells occurs on September 11, 2001 and on the days that follow. The story arc also unfolds through flashbacks and in descriptions of what resulted from the events in Gander during September 2001, including a ten-year reunion in 2011, when many of the "come from aways" returned to Gander. Much of the story is told through music and song, as well as through spoken conversations and monologues. All of the actors play multiple roles, including both the locals of Gander and the airplane passengers. The use of music, memory, and creative casting choices to tell the story helps to emphasize the themes of community and kindness in the midst of grief and sorrow that characterized so much of what happened in the United States and in the world during that terrible week in September 2001.

Top image: Gander Airport. Courtesy Gander International Airport Authority.

WELCOME TO “THE ROCK”

The Setting Behind the Play

Animal Facts

If you traveled to Gander, Newfoundland, you might expect to encounter the following Canadian wildlife: moose, long-eared bats, red foxes, newfoundland beavers, and black bears!



Come From Away mostly takes place in and around Gander, a small town on the island of Newfoundland on the tip of Northeast Canada. Additional events take place in New York, Texas, California, England, and aboard 38 airplanes.

You might wonder why the play opens with an energetic song called ‘Welcome to the Rock.’ That is because Newfoundlanders lovingly refer to their island home as “the Rock.” Take a look at the map below; do you think this is a fitting nickname?

Newfoundland and Labrador

The Canadian provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador are the easternmost regions in Canada. As the map shows, they are in the far north Atlantic ocean, which is known as the Labrador Sea, and they are a relatively short distance south and west of Greenland.

The Town of Gander

The province of Newfoundland includes an island, and the town of Gander is on the eastern part of that island. Its international airport was of enormous strategic importance during World War II.



From a distance, Newfoundland and Labrador lie on the northeastern Canadian edge. The red point indicates the small town of Gander.



Up close, Gander lies near the center of the island of Newfoundland.

Irene Sankoff and David Hein



David Hein and Irene Sankoff

Irene Sankoff and David Hein are the Olivier-award winning, Tony and Grammy nominated, Canadian writing team behind the worldwide award-winning hit Musical *Come From Away*, currently playing to over 100 countries on Apple TV+, and around the world.

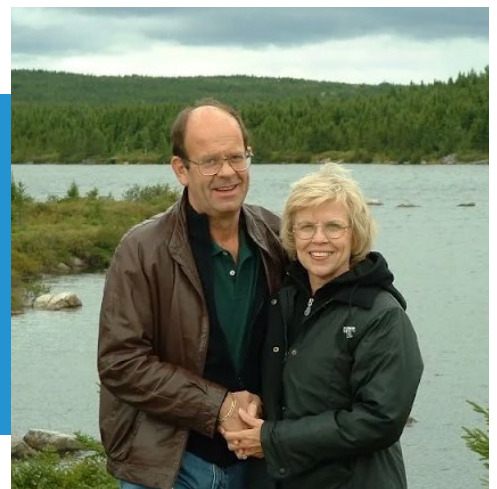
Their first show, *My Mother's Lesbian Jewish Wiccan Wedding*, based on David's mother's true story, has won Best Musical awards across North America, with Sankoff and Hein performing in many productions.

Together, they have written for Disney, Netflix, Warner Bros., HBO and the CW as well as Marvel Comics and the Canadian government. They are the recipients of the Four Freedoms Good Neighbor Award and the Meritorious Service Cross of Canada which recognizes Canadians' exceptional accomplishments.

Did You Know?

Many of the characters in *Come from Away* are based on real people! The composers interviewed countless individuals among both the Gander townspeople and the “plane people” communities.

Nick and Diane. Courtesy of Nick and Diane Marson.



September 11, 2001

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, two planes that had been hijacked by terrorists crashed into the World Trade Center Towers in New York, and both of the towers collapsed. A third hijacked plane struck part of the Pentagon Building in Washington, D.C., and a fourth, which seemed to be headed towards either the White House or the U.S. Capitol building, crashed in a field in Pennsylvania when a heroic group of passengers were able to wrest control of the plane back from the terrorists. No passengers on any of these planes survived.

The final death toll, which included passengers, those who died in the towers and at the Pentagon, and first responders, was almost 3,000 people. Very little was initially known about the attacks, and as rumors and conspiracy theories proliferated, no planes flew in the United States for nearly a week, and there was very little air traffic throughout much of the rest of the world during that time as well. The attacks were, and to this day remain, the worst ever perpetrated on U.S. soil in the history of the country.

The impact of these attacks, on the United States and on the rest of the world, was enormous, and it continues today. Airport and airline security were tightened around the globe to previously unimaginable levels. Additional security measures were implemented in a variety of locations, both public and private. And yet, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Americans in general, and New Yorkers in particular, came together both practically and psychologically in the face of incalculable loss. From large cities to small towns in the United States, Americans from all walks of life united to check on each other, to travel to New York and D.C. to offer their help and their skills, and to mourn.

Almost immediately, however, an uglier response arose: Islamophobia, or fear of individuals who were or just seemed to be Muslim, or even vaguely Middle Eastern, proliferated. People who were perceived as being suspicious, even if by no other indicator than their Arabic last name, were subjected to stringent additional security measures at airports and in many public buildings throughout the world. (These practices continue



Plumes of smoke billow from the World Trade Center towers in Lower Manhattan, New York City, after a Boeing 767 hits each tower during the September 11 attacks. Fair Use.

September 11, 2001 *continued*

today in some settings, including in many international airports.) Another consequence was the Iraq war, begun in 2003 and launched by the United States against Saddam Hussein and his regime. Despite lack of evidence, there was a strong sentiment in the administration of President George W. Bush in favor of attacking Iraq as having been behind the September 11 attacks. (In fact, substantial evidence would ultimately prove that Saudi Arabian Islamic jihadists were behind the attacks.)



As Dan Bartlett, Deputy Assistant to the President, points to news footage of the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush gathers information about the terrorist attack from a classroom at Emma E. Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, Florida.

This year, September 11, 2026 will mark the 25th anniversary of the attacks. As the 9/11 Memorial and Museum notes, there are now 100 million Americans who are “too young to remember the day that changed our city and nation forever.” Along with many other organizations, the 9/11 memorial and museum is committed to teaching these young people and future generations about what happened on that day, believing that all Americans need to understand what followed, and how the entire world continues to be affected by what transpired on one perfect September morning 25 years ago.

The Crossroads of the World

Because of its central position between New York and London, the Gander airport was constructed in 1938 and was of enormous importance during World War II. The airport served as a refueling stop for transatlantic flights until the 1960s, earning it the nickname ‘**the crossroads of the world.**’ Fortunately, the airport had not been repurposed by September 2001, so it was able to accommodate the 38 planes that needed to land there when U.S. airspace was closed.



Bird's eye view of Gander. Courtesy Gander International Airport Authority.

Themes, & Motifs



September 11, 2001: On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, two planes that had been hijacked by terrorists crashed into the World Trade Center Towers in New York, and both towers collapsed. A third hijacked plane struck part of the Pentagon Building in Washington, D.C. and a fourth, presumably headed towards the White House or the U.S. Capitol Building, crashed in a field in Pennsylvania when a heroic group of passengers were able to wrest control of the plane back from the terrorists. No passengers on any of these planes survived. The final death toll, which included the airline passengers and those who died in the towers and at the Pentagon, was almost 3,000 people.

Community Values: Although precise numbers vary, the population of Gander, Newfoundland almost doubled with the arrival of 38 planes full of passengers on September 11, 2001. The passengers and crew on many of the planes were not permitted to disembark for many hours after they landed; some passengers spent over 24 hours stuck on their plane. When they finally entered the airport, they discovered that the people of Gander had stayed up all night to cook for them and find necessary supplies for the “come from aways,” including clothes, toiletries, sleeping mats, diapers, and more. The people of Gander were able to mobilize so quickly because they already shared values such as community, neighborliness, and welcoming visitors from other parts of Canada and the world. Because these values were already a way of life for the people of Gander, they were able to come together with remarkable speed and efficiency to pool their resources and respond to the needs of the passengers who were stranded there that day.

Themes, & Motifs *continued*

Acceptance and hospitality: Closely tied to the theme of community are the themes of acceptance and of hospitality. Both of these concepts were integral to the people of Gander and the surrounding towns in Newfoundland that also took in some of the airline passengers. As the opening song of the play, “Welcome to the Rock,” notes, the early Newfoundlanders had to survive in harsh terrain amid challenging weather conditions, and their struggles led them to trust and rely on each other for mutual aid and support. Centuries later, these same values had remained the foundational principles of the community in Gander on September

11, 2001. The Newfoundlanders gave freely and generously of themselves, their homes, their time, and their kindness. The inhabitants of Gander refused to accept any financial remuneration for their hospitality, so when the stranded airline passengers had left, the Newfoundlanders discovered that the passengers not only left behind cash and checks in the community suggestions box, but they also established a scholarship fund for the Gander Academy as a thank-you to the people who had welcomed them so warmly.

Islamophobia: Unfortunately, there can be a negative dynamic to a strong, united community: fear of the other, and of anything or anyone who is different and therefore is perceived as a threat. In Gander and elsewhere in Canada, in the United States, and in much of the globe, an ugly consequence of the attacks of September 11, 2001 was the rise of Islamophobia. Almost immediately after the attacks, and before the identity of the hijackers was established as members of an Islamic Jihadist faction, an extremist branch of Islam, Islamophobia had begun to manifest itself throughout the world more powerfully than it had done for centuries. The result was a proliferation of hate speech, detainments at airports and elsewhere, threats of violence, the torturing of suspects and prisoners by the U.S. and other governments to obtain information, and ultimately war. In many instances, an individual who merely appeared to be Muslim or generally Middle Eastern was subjected to prejudicial actions. In too many situations and circumstances, this prejudice continues today.



Themes, & Motifs *continued*

Our shared humanity: More hopeful, however, is the play’s constant reminder of our universal and shared humanity. For example, although many of the airline passengers in *Come from Away* view the Egyptian traveler Ali with fear and suspicion, the Newfoundlanders do not share that anxiety; Annette lets Ali know that the library offers a quiet place to pray, and Beulah welcomes him into the kitchen once Ali explains to her that he is a Master Chef. From the earliest moments of the play, when the people of Gander are stocking up on all the supplies they can think of that the stranded passengers will require, their attention to the most basic needs of these travelers highlights what is arguably the central theme of this play: we are all travelers journeying together on the same planet, and towards the same ultimate end, and we all need many of the same things as we travel along the path. Moreover, we have a choice regarding how we behave towards our fellow travelers. Do we treat them with kindness and empathy, for their sake, and for our own, knowing as we do that one day our roles may be reversed?

Resilience: The real individuals who are depicted in *Come from Away*, both the Newfoundlanders and the stranded passengers, are changed by their experiences. For some, the stressful circumstances prove too much for their relationship. For others, however, meeting under such extraordinary circumstances allows them to come together confidently. Regardless of how they feel the effects of September 11 and of everything that follows, or how they are affected by their time in Gander, all of the passengers show their resilience as they leave Gander, and as they return there over the years, both in reality and in memory. The people of Gander are also changed by their friendships with the “come from aways,” and their community is strengthened by having reached out so generously to the people who found themselves in Gander on that terrible day.

Population Size

Approximately 9.7 million people reside in Los Angeles County; only about 547,000 people reside in the provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador (that’s 5.6% of the population of LA!), with only 12,800 people specifically in Gander.



The Importance of Casting Choices in *Come from Away: The Global Village*



September 11, 2001. 38 airplanes grounded at the Gander International Airport. Courtesy of Gander Airport Historical Society.

The musical *Come from Away* is typically performed with a cast of twelve actors (usually six men and six women). Most of the actors play one primary role and several additional smaller roles. Every actor plays at least one of the “plane people” as well as one of the townspeople of Gander. Simple costume changes, such as putting on or removing a hat or vest, help differentiate which character an actor is portraying at any given moment.

In addition to minor costume changes, the twelve actors also differentiate the characters they play by accent. The Newfoundlanders speak with a characteristic dialect and accent, while the “come from aways” speak a variety of accents and languages. One of the most touching moments in the show occurs when a bus driver from Gander is able to reassure a husband and wife from another country who do not speak English by pointing to a passage in the woman’s Bible that encourages them not to be afraid. As the action unfolds, somehow everyone finds a way to overcome the differences in language, accent, and culture in order to help themselves and each other through the challenges of the next several days.

Come from Away can be described as an **ensemble piece**. This means that no actor is the star of the show, and they all work together to tell the story that is the subject of the play. In any show, it is essential that the actors trust each other and trust their director, but trust is especially important in an ensemble piece such as this one, which tells a complex and

The Importance of Casting Choices in ***Come from Away: The Global Village*** *continued*

emotionally powerful story, and which includes a variety of components, such as singing, dancing, acting, and various types of complex choreography. Many of the actors in this production are resident artists at A Noise Within, and they have acted together in a variety of productions over many years. Others are familiar faces at the theatre as well; and still others are newcomers who are welcomed to the group. A theatre like A Noise Within, with its community of resident artists, has the ability to tackle challenging work because of the trust and familiarity among the actors, and between the actors and the directors, as well as with the designers and other creative artists who work on the show.

This ensemble approach to casting is not an accident; rather, it is a deliberate and highly significant choice on the part of the authors, Canadian husband and wife team David Hein and Ilene Sankoff. With a dozen actors shifting seamlessly in and out of their various roles, and among characters and nationalities, the audience can quickly come to see that all of these characters, who may seem very different on the surface, are in fact far more similar than they are different. The idea of our shared humanity is a central theme of the play; it is also an idea that became increasingly important in the days, weeks, months, and eventually the years that followed September 11, 2001. While it may be human nature to be afraid of those who are different, or who appear to be different, from us, we all have the potential to resist those impulses and reach out to each other in sympathy and with support, rather than push each other away. Our lives will be immeasurably richer, and our world immeasurably safer, if we are able to do so.

Community in Crisis: Practical Group Activities

Step 1: Discussion

Name some real-life examples of a **community**. What are the common traits of the communities you named?

How does **kindness** fit into the definition of community? How does kindness make a community stronger? Who offers kindness and who receives it?

Step 2: Put It to Practice

Yes, and...

Stand in a circle. One student will begin a story with only one sentence. Going around the circle, each student will advance the story one sentence at a time, always beginning with ‘Yes, and...’

Level Up: Complete a second round with a journalistic approach; re-tell the story of a true major event that happened recently at your school.

Emergency Response

Establish the following hypothetical situation: *your town has just received 7,000 unexpected visitors who have arrived with nothing but the clothes on their backs. You have ten minutes to organize your response.*

Assign small student groups with one of the following responsibilities, for which they must craft an emergency response plan: **Housing, Food, Transportation, Entertainment, Medical Care, Communication**

Level Up: Complete a second round that confronts unexpected challenges (power outage, language barriers, extreme rain, etc.)

ACTIVITY Objective

Explore the essential *Come From Away* themes of community and kindness through practical group work exercises.

Flip the Blanket

Spread a large blanket or tarp across the floor. Everyone stands on it. The ensemble must flip the blanket completely over. Everyone must stay on the blanket at all times, no one may touch the floor, and no one may speak.

Level Up: Introduce unexpected elements such as: one student cannot move their feet and must be assisted, one blanket corner holds danger and cannot be touched, students must complete the task always holding hands with another student.

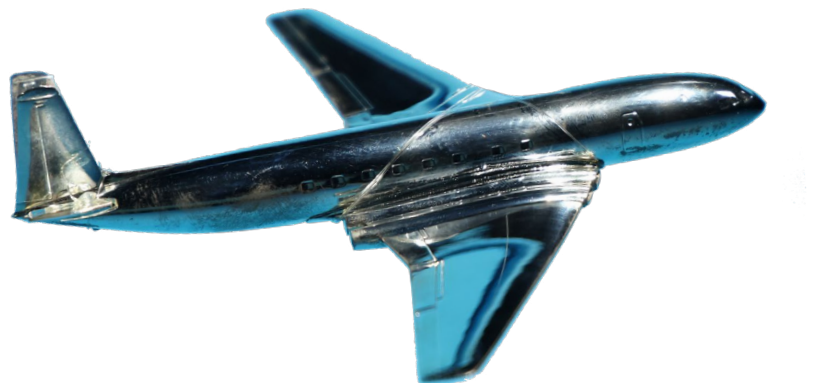
Discussion Questions

Before the Show:

1. What do you know about the events of **September 11, 2001** (9/11)? Were you alive then? Who in your family or community was alive to watch that unexpected day unfold?
2. If your family hosted complete strangers **during an emergency**, what might make that difficult? What might make it rewarding? Do we owe strangers **kindness during a crisis**?

After the Show:

1. What did you learn about 9/11 that you didn't know before? Why do you think it is important to **retell this story** decades later?
2. Throughout the play, how did the characters **build trust**? What obstacles did they have to overcome to build these relationships?
3. What qualities **made Gander an effective community** during a crisis? What can modern communities, such as your school community, learn from Gander's response?
1. The actors all performed multiple roles and presented **the story as an ensemble**; why do you think the creators of *Come From Away* made this creative decision instead of using more actors?
2. How did the show **challenge modern stereotypes** about strangers or people from different cultures?



Bonus Material

Want to learn more? Our dramaturg, Miranda Johnson-Haddad, has some suggestions.

The Real People Behind *Come from Away*

- On September 11, 2021, *Travel and Leisure Magazine* published an article about Gander and the events that happened there 20 years earlier, and about the ongoing influence of those days upon the people of Gander and Newfoundland: <https://www.travelandleisure.com/travel-news/newfoundland-labrador-9-11-anniversary>
- Here's the link to a short interview with Beverly Bass, the female American Airlines Captain who features prominently in *Come from Away*: <https://youtu.be/IQO6fXkmjQA?si=TUjf9XF9-Iy6ew2h>
- Here's the link to a short feature, showing many of the real people who are depicted in *Come from Away* and their memories of September 11, 2001: <https://youtu.be/yZdj1LxqGrs?si=ywmLHTY25KwjQ8au>
- Additional interviews and news stories are available on YouTube.

More on September 11th

- For a detailed timeline with analysis of how events unfolded on September 11, 2001, see this link from the Miller center at the University of Virginia: <https://millercenter.org/remembering-september-11/september-11-terrorist-attacks>
 - Content Alert: the above link also includes video clips of the events, some of which may be upsetting to viewers.
- For additional information and resources, including about the 25th anniversary of September 11, see: <https://www.911memorial.org/>

Islamophobia

- Islamophobia does not just affect practitioners of Islam (that is, the Muslim religion). Many individuals who are perceived as being Muslim, or even merely perceived as Middle Eastern, have been subjected to Islamophobic behavior. For additional resources about Islamophobia and ways to combat it, see below:
 - https://bridge.georgetown.edu/today_islamophobia/june-9-2026/
 - <https://crg.berkeley.edu/research/research-initiatives/islamophobia-research-and-documentation-project>
 - <https://www.un.org/en/observances/anti-islamophobia-day>

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
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