LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS

P.L.A.Y. (Performance = Literature + Art + You)
Student Matinee Series
2014-2015 Season
Dear Educators,

There are a multitude of avenues for students and educators to deepen their connection to Geva and the work we do here. There is, for example, Career Day, Summer Academy, Touchstone Workshops, Theatre Tours, The Stage Door Design Project and all of the programming connected to our student matinee performances. We encourage you visit our website or contact us for information about these programs.

There is, however, one particular aspect of our programming that I’d like to introduce you to – the Stage Door Project: Little Shop.

Continuing Geva’s mission of placing our stagework at the crossroads of artistic excellence and community engagement, we’re thrilled with the remarkable opportunity for students at Rush-Henrietta High School to perform on Geva’s Mainstage in a “shared” production of Little Shop of Horrors.

In addition to being part of Geva’s season, Little Shop will also be part of Rush-Henrietta High School’s (RHHS) season. RHHS’s directing team has cast 10 young actors and recruited an equal number of students interested in design, technical theatre, and marketing to join a creative team that mirrors Geva’s. RHHS’s director also served as the assistant director for Geva’s Little Shop.

Fueled by their work at Geva, the RHHS directing team will direct students in their own production of Little Shop. The young actors from the RHHS company will participate in an acting workshop and mentoring partnership with Geva artists, become email pen pals with their professional counterparts, sit in on Geva rehearsals, and share character insights over dinner with the adult company. The production students – focused on lighting, sound, scenic, costumes, props, puppetry, stage management, wardrobe, and dramaturgy - will share their ideas with Geva’s team, shadow the department they are reflecting, and attend production meetings and technical rehearsals. Geva’s marketing staff will exchange ideas with the RHHS marketing team, who will get involved in poster design, playbill creation, publicity, and community engagement efforts. This unique collaboration culminates when the students return to Geva to perform their own version of Little Shop on the Geva Mainstage, with Geva’s full technical support. We hope you and your students will come out to enjoy the tremendous efforts of this next generation of theatre artists. If this opportunity excites you as much as it excites us, let us know and we’ll keep your school in mind for the next Stage Door Project partnership!

The Stage Door: Little Shop performance is on Tuesday, February 10th, 2015 at 7:30pm. Tickets for this open-to-the-public performance are $14 and can be purchased online or through the Geva box office.

We’ll see you at the theatre!

Sincerely,

Lara Rhyner
Associate Director of Education
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(585) 420-2058

Participation in this production and supplemental activities suggested in this guide support the following NYS Learning Standards:
A: 1, 2, 3, 4; ELA: 1, 2, 3, 4; HST: 6, 7; SS: 1

“What do you want from me? Blood?” – Seymour
**Little Shop of Horrors** begins as three street urchins (Crystal, Ronnette, and Chiffon) introduce us to Mushnik's Flower Shop, a failing store on Skid Row. It is in the shop where we meet Mr. Mushnik, the store's owner, and his two employees, the nerdish Seymour and the insecure Audrey, on whom Seymour has a secret crush, even though she is dating Orin, a sadistic dentist.

In an effort to increase sales, Audrey persuades Mr. Mushnik to consider a strange-looking plant that Seymour has been growing in the back room. The plant, which Seymour has named Audrey II, intrigues Mushnik, who allows the plant to be featured in the shop's front window. The strange plant draws customers, and business is soon booming. While tending to Audrey II alone in the shop one night, Seymour discovers the shocking secret to the plant's health and phenomenal growth: human blood. As business – and Seymour's fame – continues to grow, so too, does Audrey II's appetite. Before long, Seymour must decide if his new-found success is worth feeding the plant's never-ending thirst for blood. And what might happen if he refuses its demands?

Howard Ashman and Alan Menken were a lyricist and composer team from 1979 until Ashman’s death in 1991. One of their very first and most successful collaborations was the 1982 off-Broadway musical, *Little Shop of Horrors*. This production won the 1982-83 New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Musical, the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Musical, and the Outer Critics Circle Award. At the time of the original production's close, after 2,209 performances, it was the third-longest running musical and highest grossing production in off-Broadway history.

Ashman and Menken's collaborations also include the Disney animated musicals *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Alan Menken, who also composed Disney's *Aladdin*, is an eight-time Academy-Award winner, currently tied for third place with the late costume designer Edith Head for the most Oscar wins of all time.

**Howard Ashman and Alan Menken**

**The Cast**

- Talitha Farrows (Chiffon)
- Gavyn Pickens (Ronnette)
- Trista Dollison (Crystal)
- Will Blum (Seymour)
- Danny Rutigliano (Mushnik)
- Kristen Mengelkoch (Audrey)
- John Gregorio (Orin)
- Raymond Carr (Audrey II)
- Bethany Thomas (voice of Audrey II)

“Seymour, why don’t you run in back and bring out that strange and interesting new plant you’ve been working on.” – Audrey
Sean Daniels, Geva’s Director of Artistic Engagement and the director of *Little Shop of Horrors*, shares some insights into the show:

**The moral...**

The central moral question of the show (and all sci-fi tales usually show us people making moral choices under extreme circumstances) is “would you kill to get what you want?” and then “would you kill to keep it?” It’s a play that asks what you would do to get out of your current class. We live in a country where the divide between rich and poor gets greater every year, so “how desperate are you to get out of your class and not return to where you started?” is still a relevant question.

**The vision...**

One of the things we really wanted to do in the design was create a world so dreary that people would fantasize about getting out - and even sing about places that were green. So, at the top of the show, the color palate is very dark, dirty, and gritty, and each time that Seymour makes a choice and someone dies, the color palate brightens. New signs come in, the costumes and set get livelier, and even the trash cans become better looking. Essentially, Seymour leaves the lower class world and gets the girl of his dreams. But how much will he sacrifice to keep that? How much would you sacrifice to keep that?

**The inspiration...**

Everyone has sweet spot musicals and, for me, *Little Shop* is one. I played Mr. Mushnik in 11th grade (I had to draw crowfeet on my eyes with make-up from my Ben Nye kit), and I’ve loved it ever since. There are so few sci-fi musicals out there - and even on top of that - so few musicals that have this much joy at the center of them. Yes, it asks a dark question, and one that feels relevant to today’s world, but it’s also one that has a real yet slight and charming wink to the audience, and our authors have written some music that is impossible not to sing and dance to.

**The challenges...**

One thing we’ve learned in rehearsals is that the show never really lets up - its big number after big number, and it asks a ton of our Seymour. I think he leaves stage for part of one song in Act II. And that’s a lot of dancing, singing, and carrying the emotional weight of the show. It also asks a lot of the puppeteer, who is playing a bit role at the top of the show and then needs to quickly become a puppeteer for our 4 puppets. Also, he has to do all of his work crouched inside our puppets and still leave enough room to let the plant actually eat actors on stage.

**The significance...**

I think the play has to have a dark ending. That’s the deal Seymour makes early on, and that’s what makes deals with the devil so fascinating - there’s no way out of them. But, through the magic of musical theatre and puppets, it’s an amazing ride to that realization.

**The take-away...**

It’s a joyful musical, so I want the audience to leave having a great time, and to have really enjoyed the theatricality of it - the things you couldn’t get from watching a movie version. That’s why I think the puppets in this production are so key. It’s a real way of celebrating what our art form does best, which is suspend disbelief and ask you to revel in the charm of what is happening directly in front of you.

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Above: *Little Shop of Horrors* director Sean Daniels.
“It ain’t bad enough I got the winos permanently decorating the storefront?” – Mr. Mushnik

“At its heart, Little Shop of Horrors is a Greek moral tragedy in which a young and fallible hero seeks to improve his life by exploiting a higher power. In typical Greek fashion, the angry gods don’t just punish the hero, but extend their wrath to everyone the hero touches, including those he loves. A trio of girls – Ronnette, Crystal, and Chiffon – replaces the Greek chorus in Little Shop of Horrors, and they sing in the style of the ‘60s girl groups for which they are named. Just like the chorus in Greek tragedies, the trio serves as a narrator and moves the action along through musical interludes meant to help the audience keep up with the story. In the beginning, they offer the audience a musical warning to avoid the dangers they are about to see. And at the end when everything has gone terribly wrong, the chorus and the characters offer the audience a moral to the story. The message to the human audience is to be careful what you wish for. As Seymour learns, there is a terrible price to pay when you get what you want, instead of what you earn.” - Don Leavitt, “Love, and a Desire To Be More Than We Are” Insights, 2003

A Greek chorus serves to give advice, ask questions, take part in the action of the play, narrate, react the way an ideal audience would respond, set the mood and tone of the play, and add movement, spectacle, song, and dance. After you see Geva’s Little Shop, consider the Ronnettes and the role they play in the story. Was their response to key moments in the play similar to the audience’s? Did they offer advice, move the story forward, or support any of the characters? How did they help set the mood and tone of the play? Did they serve any other important functions in your understanding of the story? In what ways were the three girls seemingly one character? In what ways were they individuals, unique from one another?

Doo-wop is a style of vocal-based rhythm and blues music popular in the mid 1950s to early 1960s in the United States. The name “doo-wop” was taken from the ad-lib syllables sung in harmony in doo-wop songs.

Research the creation and evolution of doo-wop music.
Can you pinpoint any doo-wop songs you have heard before?

Little Shop of Horrors is set in an unnamed urban neighborhood modeled after the Skid Row area of Los Angeles – a 50-square block area of downtown LA where approximately 11,000 homeless individuals live. Most people in Skid Row live in homeless shelters, cheap daily-rate hotels, or on the streets. Many pitch tents in front of fish or produce warehouses, toy stores, missions, shelters, or drop-in hotels. The area is trying to revitalize and redefine itself as “Central City East.”

Use the Internet to research images of “Skid Row LA” for a better understanding of the setting of this story. Consider our own city of Rochester. Do we have an area that reminds you of Skid Row? Is this area remaining the same as before or is it being revitalized? If so, in what ways? What happens to the people who live there when a neighborhood is transformed?
In the fall of 1979, the songwriting team of Howard Ashman and Alan Menken was at a loss. They were fresh off the opening of their adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut’s novel, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and were in search of ideas for their next project. It was then that an idea called to them from Howard’s childhood. He’d never forgotten director Roger Corman’s low-budget 1960 movie, *The Little Shop of Horrors*. In that movie, a nebbish Los Angeles flower shop employee named Seymour develops a new crossbreed of flytrap (named the “Audrey Junior” as a tribute to his workplace crush) that learns to speak...and begins to demand human blood.

With this new framework in place, Ashman and Menken crafted a musical comedy that was truly its own animal. A Greek chorus of street urchins joined the cast, each named after a black 60s girl group: Crystal, Ronnette, and Chiffon. Major characters were cut. The setting was no longer specifically Los Angeles, but an unspecified American slum. The movie’s shrill little “Audrey Junior” was reborn as the intimidating, bass-voiced “Audrey II.” The flytrap was no longer an earthly crossbreed, but a monster from outer space with designs to repopulate the planet. Perhaps, most notably, the minor role of a dentist was expanded into a sadistic villain with a bad habit for laughing gas.

When *Little Shop of Horrors* (the “The” was dropped) opened at the Workshop of the Players’ Art (WPA) Theatre in 1982, it was an instant hit with audiences. The reviews were also excellent and the production transferred to the East Village’s Orpheum Theatre in the summer. It won the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Musical and quickly received London and Los Angeles productions. There was interest in bringing the musical to Broadway, where it would be eligible for Tony nominations. But Howard, having written the piece specifically to work off-Broadway, wanted it to stay at the intimate Orpheum. It would run there for five years.

*Little Shop of Horrors* may have been a spoofy comedy, but Howard was never content to be merely clever; he understood how every song might be used to succinctly express character, or to catapult the story ahead. Above all, Howard never allowed his playful vocabulary or pop culture savvy to eclipse the integrity of his characters. In fact, he balked when the show was described as campy—as it still frequently is. In an introduction to the published script, Howard warns that the humor should arise naturally from the words themselves, and that the performances should be “almost childlike in sincerity and intensity.”

*Little Shop of Horrors* eventually made the leap from the stage back to cinemas in a 1986 movie starring Steve Martin, Rick Moranis and Ellen Greene, who reprised her role as Audrey from the original stage production. The film was a mild hit in theaters, but it became a smash when released to video. It received revivals in 2003 and 2006 (on Broadway and London’s West End, respectively) as well as a national American tour in 2004. In addition to many professional productions, *Little Shop of Horrors* is still regularly staged by high school, college, and community theatre groups.

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“**We’re not talking about one hungry plant here. We’re talking about ... World Conquest !**” — Seymour
Prosperity and Paranoia: America in the Fifties

In her dramaturgical packet, dramaturg Jean Gordon Ryon writes that “while Little Shop of Horrors is a light-hearted musical, the movie that inspired it emerged out of a very particular time and culture – America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This period of time was characterized in the U.S. by two distinct points of view. On the one hand was a feeling of prosperity and optimism; it was countered by a looming sense of pervasive fear and paranoia. The prosperity was caused by a post-war boom (in, for example, the economy, manufacturing, and birth rates) and the optimism by a sense of America being the most powerful country in the world following its victories in World War II. Returning vets were eager to settle down to regular, often corporate, jobs and women seemed happy to return to their pre-war role of homemaker. The nuclear family was celebrated and suburban life was coveted. Conversely, many people were haunted by fear of the new atom bomb and of the increasing influence of communism, both in America and throughout the world. These fears were enhanced by the regular presence of air raid drills and the building of bomb shelters. They were also manifested through popular media such as science fiction and horror films in which technology run amuck destroys humanity or alien creatures from outer space take over the world. By setting Little Shop of Horrors in the early 1960s, Howard Ashman and Alan Menken were able to acknowledge a nostalgia for the 1950s and 60s, a time seen as innocent and idyllic by many Americans, while simultaneously touching on some of the darker elements of the age – as well as allowing for the consideration of similar concerns in the country in the late 1970s and early 1980s.”

Compare America in the 1950s and 60s to the country during the late 70s and 80s. What was different? What remained the same? What concerns were still present and which ones had been alleviated?

Is there a connection between the feelings of optimism and despondency experienced by many Americans during the 1950s and early 60s? Or are they separate from one another?

Research monster movies and magazines from the 1950s and 60s. How often do their stories grow out of everyday occurrences? How often do they develop from out-of-the-ordinary circumstances? Have some of those circumstances now become commonplace?

“It’s just a daydream of mine. A little development I dream of. Just off the Interstate. Not fancy like Levittown.” – Audrey
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES**

Discuss the pros and cons – both concrete and abstract, obvious and subtle – of the thirst for success. Where is the line in the healthy balance between wanting to better your life and creating a monster? Can the best of intentions destroy you (and others)? How do you walk the line, without crossing it, when seeking to improve your circumstances? Do you think Seymour and Audrey were right or wrong in their desire for a better life or in how they went about getting it? Did Seymour deserve his outcome? If you were in Seymour’s situation, would you have done anything differently?

Use the text of *Little Shop of Horrors* and the actions you observed onstage to chart then discuss the qualities of unhealthy relationships vs. healthy relationships, based on Audrey’s interactions with Orin and Seymour. Why, do you think, did Audrey stay with Orin? What specific similarities and differences did you notice in Orin and Seymour’s treatment of Audrey? How did Audrey respond to each man? Did Audrey’s self-esteem or identity seem to shift based on who she was with? Was any other character’s esteem or identity impacted by someone, something, or events throughout the story?

In small groups, research then create a list of five other iconic musicals, either classic or contemporary, and explain their significance in society and to the art of theatre.

Consider *Little Shop of Horrors*’ classic “rags to riches” template and character stereotypes (the evil dentist, the overlooked and shy, nice guy, the low-self-esteem girl next door with a heart of gold, etc.). In what ways does *Little Shop* propagate these ideas? In what way does it demolish them or offer another alternative?

Research and create a photo journey of dentistry through history. What tools and methods are used in modern dentistry and what was their equivalent in the 1950s? And earlier? Where did the stereotype of the evil dentist originate? Do you think this stereotype is an outdated notion or is there truth to it?

Investigate carnivorous plants (pitfall traps, flypaper, snap traps, suction traps, lobster-pot traps, etc.). Include an image and description of several different kinds of carnivorous plant that details their common name, scientific name, family, and genus. Explain their characteristics, what they eat, how they function, their habitat, and their ornamentation. Based on your research, what kind of a plant do you think Audrey II is?

As artists, one of the most important questions we frequently ask ourselves is “why?” It is vital for artists to understand why their character says and does the things they do, and we strive for our audiences to understand why too. Most of the time, “bad” or “evil” characters like Orin and Audrey II are not born that way – they may be misunderstood, have good intentions, or something might have happened to make them that way. The more we seek to understand these characters motivations instead of judging them, the more we learn – in plays and in real life. Based on what you know about Orin and Audrey II, why do you think Orin behaves the way he does? Why do you think Audrey II craves blood? Is she inherently bad, or are her intentions simply misunderstood? Is there a reason or excuse behind these characters’ actions? If so, what do you think it is? Write a paragraph or monologue describing their backstory.

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“You see, girls, my line of work requires a certain fascination with human pain and suffering.” - Orin
“When designing *Little Shop of Horrors*, the first place I went for inspiration was the very original cult classic film, not the musical film. Sean (Daniels, *Little Shop’s* director) and I wanted to focus on a combination of the darkness and the art of the Film Noir and B-Horror flicks, as well as the comedy and camp that can come out of B-Films and Musicals.

My next sources were color versions of old horror posters, vintage prints, and the like, and - of course - silhouettes of the age. I love the late 1950s and early 1960s as a fashion period, so this is one of my favorite periods of research. When I work on a project like this one, especially with such beloved music, I have that going on in the background when I’m researching and drawing.

Audrey, being the heart of our musical, was the one we wanted to blossom the most, as Audrey II grows. So, as the plant gets larger and takes over the shop, we incorporated more and more Technicolor into her clothes. The plant’s growth also affects the other characters. As the plant helps make Seymour and, by proxy, Mushnik more successful, they get more colorful, as does the trio of street urchins. Color infuses itself into the poverty of skid row.

There are a lot of patterns that you’ll see in the clothes; Audrey has a penchant for pink and leopard print. So, if she’s not wearing leopard, she’s wearing pink. Or maybe both! She also has flowers frequently incorporated into the patterns or textures of her clothes. The three street urchins - Ronnette, Crystal and Chiffon - start in dark, faded colors and textures, and then as they blossom they get brighter and end in a floral/Audrey II inspired set of gowns themselves. Mushnik’s color palette is warm and comfortable browns - earth tones. He's soft, and a bit dingy, and definitely downtrodden and surly. Seymour is soft, in light blues at first, with sweaters and warm, loving textures. You just want to hug him. The dentist is in black, white, and red. He’s harsh, hard, and has a lot of leather.

I’ve designed the costumes for this show four times, and this is the version of the show I’m most excited about because Sean’s take is to get at the heart of this story - that dreams can become a reality and then influence us and our communities, and then, perhaps, overtake us entirely.”

- Jen Caprio, Geva’s *Little Shop of Horrors* costume designer

“No offense, but with all the interviews and photo sessions, a big, important experimental botonist has to look the part.” - Audrey
As Audrey II continues to grow throughout the play, we are struck with the alarming sensation that our carnivorous plant is far from full and she has no intentions of slowing down. Together, the production’s director, scenic designer, and puppet designer collaborated to design larger-than-life tentacles that invade the theatre to fulfill this vision. And it was left in the crafty hands of Geva’s renowned prop shop to figure out how to bring those designs to life. Since actors will be operating the enormous appendages, the tentacles needed to be safe, lightweight, comfortable, and capable of being put on and taken off quickly. But just how do you create genuine, wearable, 7-foot tentacles that weigh as little as possible, can be operated with one arm, and are easily controllable?

1. The lightweight and flexible aluminum frame (think something that resembles ultra-light, bendable crutches that allow for fluid and authentic tentacle-like movement) was designed, welded together, and delivered to Geva by puppet designer Daniel Kerr.

2. Based on a rendered image of how the tentacles were envisioned to look, Mark Bissonnette, Geva’s Prop Master, added foam pipe insulation to the end of each tentacle to create a narrow finger-like tip.

3. On the opposite end of the tentacle, a padded grasp bar to anchor the actor’s hand, foam to cradle the top and bottom of the arm (where it would otherwise rest on the bare aluminum frame), and a cardboard semi-circle to cup the wrist and lower arm are added for function and comfort.

4. Strips of air pillows taped around the outside of the aluminum bulk up the look of the tentacle, protect the frame, and provide cushion for safety purposes.

5. Next, bubble wrap is placed within the gaps left by the air pillows. Filling in the structure with bubble wrap helps build the extra girth required for the finished product to look like a plant instead of a crutch.

Above: Scenic Designer Michael Raiford’s rendering for the Little Shop of Horrors set.

Above: Steps 1 and 2.

Above: Step 3.

Above: Steps 4 and 5.

“Look, you’re a plant. An inanimate object.” - Seymour
6. The tentacle is wrapped in a thick layer of bubble wrap and taped shut to further flesh out the girth, create smoother lines, and add another layer of protection.

7. Cheesecloth, a very lightweight material that keeps everything in place and can be quickly stapled together rather than sewn, is wrapped around the entire tentacle as a base layer. Now the actors can safely practice using the tentacles in rehearsal while they await the final layer.

8. The final layer is an aesthetic covering designed by the scenic and puppet designers that will make the tentacles appear life-like in both color and texture.

But you’ll have to wait until the performance to see the finished tentacles – and the other puppets, including this mouthy Audrey II (below) - in action!

Above and at right: The frame for Audrey II (in progress.)
Tickets still available for ...

April 8th, 9th and 15th at 10:30 a.m.
Recommended for high school audiences

To reserve seats please call (585) 420-2035

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