



“The Thanksgiving Play” Facilitation Guide

Part One: Before Watching

Background

Larissa FastHorse is a playwright and performing arts advocate who illuminates Indigenous processes of artmaking and storytelling as well as Native American perspectives on contemporary life. She is a member of the Sicangu Lakota Nation and was raised in South Dakota. FastHorse started her career as a ballet dancer and choreographer. She later became involved in Native American drama and found her home in playwriting.

The motivation to write “The Thanksgiving Play” came from repeated feedback that the plays Larissa had written with primarily Native American actors were “unstable.” From this frustration, she challenged herself to write a play for white-presenting people. “The Thanksgiving Play” uses satire to deal with the contemporary Indigenous experience. Larissa says, “It’s really showing us what it’s like to be us. Like, what it is like to be myself in these rooms that are primarily white, that are primarily non-Indigenous in all ways.”

“The Thanksgiving Play” opened on Broadway on April 20, 2023, and was the first time a known female Native American playwright had a play produced on Broadway. The production closed in June of 2023 and has been performed at regional, community and universities consistently. It was one of the top 10 most produced plays of the 2023-2024 season.

Satire

Satire is the art of making someone or something look ridiculous, raising laughter to embarrass, humble, or discredit its targets. Satire is mainly used to alert the public of a problem and force a change. There are four main types of satire:

- **Exaggeration** - To enlarge, increase or represent something beyond normal bounds so that it becomes ridiculous, and its faults can be seen.
- **Incongruity** - To present things that are out of place or are absurd in relation to its surroundings. Particular techniques include oxymoron, metaphor and irony.
- **Parody** - To imitate the techniques and/or style of some person, place or thing to ridicule the original. For parody to be successful, the reader must know the original text that is being ridiculed.
- **Reversal** - To present the opposite of the normal situation or order.

“The Thanksgiving Play” has many moments where the audience may find themselves thinking, “I laughed. Is that OK?” Larissa says, “Yes, it’s a comedy. It’s a satire. Like, of course you’re supposed to laugh.” She has added identifiers like “satirical comedy” or “farce” to the title page of many of her plays to address a common fear of laughing at Indigenous ideas and characters. Being able to appropriately identify satire helps to develop critical thinking and prevents the spread of misinformation.

Part Two: After Watching

Themes

Performative “Wokeness” and White Guilt: “White guilt” is described as the unproductive feelings of shame that many white people develop upon learning about systemic racism and how they as white people have benefitted from the oppression of people of color. Logan and Jaxton embody white guilt by over-correcting when

trying to produce a culturally sensitive play. Acknowledging white privilege and feeling guilt can be a good first step toward activism, but these characters use it to soothe their own discomfort. They also leverage “wokeness” (being politically and culturally aware) for clout. They use their white guilt to act as credibility to take the lead on devising. All the characters go into the devising process with ulterior motives in mind.

Historical Preservation and Presentation: Caden joins the project to add a layer of historical accuracy to protect the production from criticism. Logan assumes that if they are only telling the “true” narrative, no one can object. Throughout Caden’s discussions of the historical context, we can see that historical accuracy doesn’t make the project innocent or “appropriate for children.” It’s impossible to convey the murder and displacement of millions of Indigenous people as “kid friendly.” This leads the characters to exact the same sanitization of history that they seek to avoid by removing the Indigenous people from the story entirely. This same situation can likely explain the decades of historically inaccurate Thanksgiving plays, like the ones seen in scenes one, three, five and seven. These short scenes represent the popular Thanksgiving performances that lack Indigenous perspectives in creation and performance. These performances are often racist and full of stereotypes, but after being done year after year for decades, they shift the cultural memory away from the harms done to Native Americans.

Stereotypes

Even though there are no Indigenous people in the play, the characters all have internalized stereotypes about Native Americans. Alicia has no Indigenous ties but uses her assumptions of them to sell herself with a “Native American” headshot featuring a turquoise necklace and braids. Jaxton says he could tell Alicia wasn’t actually Native because she wasn’t “centered enough” but claimed he was drawn to her ways upon initially meeting. As a “yoga dude,” Jaxton appropriates many different cultures. The short scenes also represent many stereotypes and in ways that many people have encountered. Many “traditional” Thanksgiving celebrations overlook the negative stereotypes about Indigenous people they portray. These short scenes vary with each production and can be powerful representations of how inappropriate stereotypes can be.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the play satirizing? Choose three clear examples of satire and explain.
2. The stage directions indicate that the odd-numbered scenes (the Thanksgiving song, the turkey song, the traditional songs, and the high school presentation) can be presented in a multitude of ways. Examples include puppets, real children, performed by the cast, video recorded, etc. If you could pick one scene to re-direct, which scene would you choose, and what would you do?
3. What is white privilege, and how does it appear in the play? Choose one character and explain how they used white privilege (intentionally or unintentionally).
4. What moment in the play was the most impactful for you? Why?
5. What moment in the play was the least impactful for you? Why?
6. What was your main takeaway from the play?

Sources

- [MacArthur Foundation Fellows: Larissa FastHorse](#)
- [NPR: Native American playwright Larissa FastHorse takes on the 'wild mess' of Thanksgiving](#)
- [WBUR: Playwright Larissa FastHorse Wins MacArthur Genius Grant](#)
- [Native Arts + Culture Foundation: Larissa FastHorse](#)
- [American Theatre: The Top 10 Most Produced Plays of the 2023-24 Season](#)
- [PBS: Be MediaWise Lesson 10: Recognizing satire before sharing it as misinformation](#)