

# Rapture, Blister, Burn Study Guide



# Rapture, Blister, Burn

WEST COAST PREMIERE IN THE  
GIL CATES THEATER AT THE GEFFEN PLAYHOUSE

**AUGUST 13 – SEPTEMBER 22, 2013**

SPECIAL THANKS TO

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Ellen Catania and Resa Nikol**

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*This publication is to be used for educational purposes only.*

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## SECTION 1

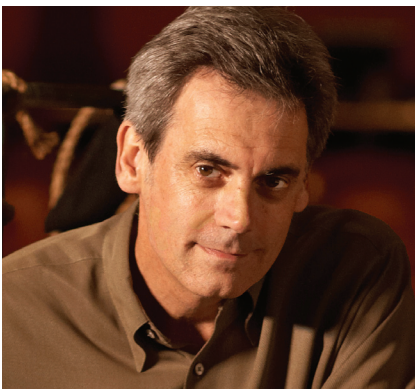
# ABOUT THIS PRODUCTION

## Rapture, Blister, Burn



## ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S COMMENT

RANDALL ARNEY



Welcome to *Rapture, Blister, Burn*, the first play of our 2013/2014 season. We are so pleased to open with Gina Gionfriddo's smart, funny look at what it means to be a woman in this millennium. Gina has created characters who articulate the arguments of feminist perspectives through the ages and who then fall victim to the very traps condemned by these philosophers. Within the character of Catherine, we recognize the struggle of balancing a drive to succeed professionally with developing personal relationships on which she can depend. Having worked for years to disabuse students of the construct that women are defined by spouses and children, Catherine finds her point of view cold comfort when faced with impending loneliness. Gina weaves these vast questions into a story with humor and pathos, making the ride a pleasure. It is also a delight to welcome Peter DuBois, Artistic Director at Boston's Huntington Theater, with this critically acclaimed production. In our West Coast premiere, we reunite Peter with his original New York ensemble of talented actors and designers. They have enthusiastically re-visited this provocative story, deepening and enriching the production.

# PLAY SYNOPSIS & SETTING

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## **SYNOPSIS**

In *Rapture, Blister, Burn*, rock star feminist scholar Catherine has returned home to help care for her mother Alice – and take stock of her life. She reconnects with two friends from graduate school, Gwen, a homemaker, and her husband Don, who gives Catherine a job at the college where he is a dean. When Catherine offers a summer seminar at her mother’s home, Gwen and college student Avery join her. As the three generations of women discuss work, love, and family with honesty and sharp humor, conflicts and desires surface, prompting Catherine, Don, and Gwen to reach for happiness and conquer their disappointments.

## **SETTING**

A college town in New England, summer.

## **RUNNING TIME**

Approximately 2 hours. *There will be one 15 minute intermission.*

# ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHIES

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## **GINA GIONFRIDDO** (Playwright)

Gina Gionfriddo was a 2012 Pulitzer Prize finalist for *Rapture, Blister, Burn* (commissioned by and premiered at Playwrights Horizons) and a 2009 finalist for *Becky Shaw*, which had its world premiere at Actors Theatre of Louisville’s Humana Festival of New American Plays and its New York premiere Off Broadway at Second Stage Theatre. Ms. Gionfriddo’s other plays include *After Ashley* (Humana Festival and Off Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre) and *US Drag* (Off Broadway by the stageFARM). She has received an Obie Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, The Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, an Outer Critics Circle Award, The Helen Merrill Award for Emerging Playwrights, and an American Theatre Critics Association/Steinberg citation. She has written for the television dramas *Law & Order*, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, *Cold Case*, *Borgia* and *House of Cards*. Ms. Gionfriddo has contributed essays on rock music to the literary journal *The Believer* and short fiction to *Canteen*. She is currently working on a new play commission from Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles.

## **PETER DuBOIS** (Director)

New York Stage and Film: *The Power of Duff*. Playwrights Horizons: *Rapture, Blister, Burn*. West End/London: *All New People*. Almeida Theatre: *Becky Shaw*. Roundabout Theater Company: *Sons of the Prophet*. Second Stage: *Becky Shaw*, *Trust*, *All New People*. Public Theater/NYSF: *Measure for Pleasure*, *Richard III*, *Mom How Did You Meet the Beatles* and *Biro*. LAByrnth Theater Company/Public Theater: *Jack Goes Boating* and *View From 151st Street*. Also: American Conservatory Theater, Trinity Repertory Company, Humana Festival of New Plays, Manchester Opera House, Kings Theater Glasgow. Associate Producer, Public Theater/NYSF (2003-2005), Resident Director, Public Theater/NYSF (2005-2008), Artistic Director, Perseverance Theater Company, Juneau, Alaska (1997-2003). Peter is in his sixth season as the Artistic Director of the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston. Peter’s productions have been on the annual top ten lists of *The New York Times*, *Time Out*, *New York Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Newsday*, *Variety*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Evening Standard* and the *Improper Bostonian*.

# THEMES & TOPICS

## FEMINISM



### Women's Liberation Movement

#### FEMINISM

The term *feminism* emerged in France in the late 1800s as *feminisme*, fusing the French word for woman (*femme*) with the suffix (*-isme*) that denotes a political ideology or movement.

#### SOURCES

*No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* by Estelle B. Freedman (Ballantine Books, 2002)

*A History of U.S. Feminisms* by Rory Dicker (Seal Press, 2008)



Today, in the United States, when women can wear what they like, go to college, vote in elections, and have careers as business executives, astronauts, artists, and government leaders, it is easy to forget they were once denied these rights, choices and opportunities.

The term *feminism* encompasses both the belief that women and men are of “equal worth” and that social movements have been necessary to turn this belief into a reality. Because these movements have surged forward then ebbed – after losing momentum or being actively opposed – they are often described as occurring in three waves.

First wave feminism, which began in the late 1800s, primarily championed the right to vote and gain access to education. From the 1960s through the 1980s, second wave feminists fought to expand women’s work opportunities, economic power, legal rights, and control over their sexual and reproductive choices. Since the 1990s, those aligned with the third wave have developed more personal and culturally diverse approaches to feminism and connected their causes to human rights issues for women and men.

In *Rapture, Blister, Burn*, the characters relate to feminism in different ways, in part because of their age. Catherine and Gwen, both in their forties, have been influenced by second wave feminism, which made it possible for them to have a family, a career or both. Twenty-one-year-old Avery revels in the freedom to “hook up” but does not identify as a feminist. Alice, who is in her 70’s, believes that marriage, and doing whatever it takes to secure it, is still all-important, especially where her daughter is concerned.

### DISCUSSION POINT

What images or associations spring to mind when you think of feminism? Upon what are they based?

# OPPOSING VIEWS

## SOURCES

[tinyurl.com/WikiSchlafly](http://tinyurl.com/WikiSchlafly)

*Feminism 101*, by Amy Levinson  
(*Rapture, Blister, Burn* Geffen Playhouse Program)

Catherine invites Gwen and Avery to consider counter-arguments to feminism by acquainting them with the views of Phyllis Schlafly, a conservative activist. Schlafly helped power the backlash against feminism during its second wave and defeat the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution. As Geffen Playhouse Literary Director Amy Levinson has noted, Schlafly's arguments against the ERA "included claims that it would: undermine traditional families, remove legal protections of wives, subject women to the military draft, remove barriers to women in combat, promote abortion on demand, open the way for "homosexual marriage" and require that public bathrooms be unisex."

As the women argue about Schlafly's beliefs, especially those about the need for women to appear weak in order to lure men into marriage, Catherine admits Schlafly may have "valid points" about men's sensibilities, and wonders if focusing so strongly on her career has gotten in the way of creating a long-term relationship with a man.

### CATHERINE

Look, Schlafly is very clear that when a man and woman come together, the man must lead and the woman must follow. Now, yes that's an offensive notion when you put it out there as a rule. But my middle-aged observation is that ... In a relationship between two people, you can't both go first.

## DISCUSSION POINT

If the rights, choices and opportunities women enjoy today were taken away, how would you or the women in your life be affected?

Has feminism affected women adversely? If so, how?

# FACING REALITY

Much of the humor, humanity and surprise in *Rapture, Blister, Burn* lies in how Catherine and her friends rethink the choices they have made in their lives. Catherine envies Gwen's family life with Don, who was her boyfriend in graduate school, before she left to pursue her career. Gwen is unhappy with Don and his escapist habits and wants to move to New York to finish the studies she abandoned. Don, a chronic underachiever, thinks he needs someone to inspire him, not scold him as Gwen does.

Catherine has a moment of clarity about why she's still alone, during a conversation with Don.

CATHERINE

Here I've been feeling on unequal footing with you because I have no family.

DON

A family's easier to get than a career like yours.

CATHERINE

I don't know that that's true.

DON

Did you want one--a family?

CATHERINE

I would say yes, but ... I think I wanted a family like you wanted a career. I wanted it but I didn't do the stuff you gotta do to get it.

### DISCUSSION POINT

Can women "have it all" – successful careers and thriving families? If so, what does it take? If not, why? How about men?



# ADDICTION

## SOURCES

*Addiction: definition and implications*, British Journal of Addiction (1990)

[tinyurl.com/ASAM-defined](http://tinyurl.com/ASAM-defined)



While struggles with substances and behaviors are not central to the play, they do color how the characters see themselves and each other. Early on, Gwen announces to Catherine she has given up drinking, “And part of my recovery is about, you know, expressing feelings, not drinking them down.” A bit later, Don is chagrined to learn Gwen has revealed to Catherine his addiction to Internet pornography and the trouble it has created in their marriage.

Still regarded by some as a “failure of will,” addiction is believed by many medical professionals to be a brain-based affliction, involving “reward circuitry” in the brain. Addicts engage in patterns of behavior that “produce pleasure and provide relief from internal discomfort” over which they lose control. Whether seeking escape through substances, such as alcohol or drugs, or behaviors like gambling and viewing pornography, addicts persist “despite significant negative consequences” to their physical and mental health, relationships, careers, and financial well-being.

Depending on the severity of the disease, recovery usually requires some kind of intervention, such as going to a rehabilitation center, receiving outpatient care, or participating in 12 Step programs – as Gwen is doing. While life-affirming for the person who has decided to change, recovery can be unsettling to those around them, especially if they are still engaged in addictive behaviors.

## MONOLOGUES

Playwrights create characters through dialogue. The content, word choices, rhythms and pauses reveal their attitudes, desires, intentions and backgrounds. Monologues give individual characters the chance to plumb and express their thoughts and feelings more deeply.

Read the monologue below from *Rapture, Blister, Burn* once through without stopping.

- What is Gwen's overall state of mind?

Read through more slowly, highlighting key words or phrases that tell you about Gwen's life.

- What is her economic background?
- Who are the people are in her life?
- How does she feel about them?
- Why does she pause? What might she be thinking or feeling?
- What is she trying to convey to Catherine? What makes you think so?

GWEN

(to Catherine)

You wish you'd had a family; I wish I'd finished school. We have *no money*. We live this lie in our nice house. You can be poor when your kids are little; they don't need much. It's when they get older ... We're barely managing Julian's private school tuition; if we try to do it for Devon, it'll break us. And the public schools here are bad. The plan was for Don to work hard and get a better job – somewhere with decent schools. He didn't even try! See, I'm sober so this crisis is real to me in every moment. Don ... He smokes pot, he drinks ... He's tranquilized fifty percent of the time and it's kept him from bettering his life. Our life. There. I said it.

### DISCUSSION POINT

Think of family members or friends with unique personalities. What do they reveal about their thoughts, feelings and natures through their word choices, rhythms and tones?

## SECTION 3

# PERSONNEL PROFILE

## AN INTERVIEW WITH AMY LEVINSON

### ***What is your official title, and how long have you worked at the Geffen Playhouse?***

I am Artistic Associate/Literary Director. I also serve as the resident dramaturg, and have been at the Geffen for fifteen years – almost my whole professional life.

### ***How would you describe your work?***

As literary director, I read plays, recommend the strongest ones to our artistic director, and work with him to select the plays for each season. I serve as a dramaturg on an as-needed basis, by providing information to a director regarding time, place, social customs, etc. of a play. Alternatively, when I work with writers I am the equivalent of a book editor. I ask questions about what they want to achieve and provide notes to help them realize what they have envisioned.

### ***How did you get involved with theatre and end up in literary management and dramaturgy?***

In high school, after a friend suggested I audition for the theatre department, I became interested in stage management, because all I wanted to do was spend time with scripts. At the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where I got my B.A. and M.F.A in theater, a professor suggested I focus on dramaturgy, which is a difficult profession to get into. But I had found what I was supposed to do.

### ***How do you select the plays you recommend and choose for the season?***

If I am inclined to turn the page, find out what happens next, and see it through to the end, I figure the audience will too. We also look for distinctive characters, smart, relatable dialogue, and subject matter, like social issues, that will interest an audience. Beyond this is personal taste, which is why it is important to have a team select



the plays for a season. Listening to each other's points of view helps us select works that will “woo” audiences in different ways. We want them to be moved and intellectually stimulated by plays they resonate with and ones that are new and challenging.

### ***As a full-time professional and parent, what resonates with you in the current production, Rapture, Blister, Burn?***

To me the play is about how impossible it is to “have it all.” As a working mother, my attention is always split. I do unplug from work when I am with my son, but I am hard on myself when I can't give my all to both parts of my life.

### ***What do you find most challenging about your work at the Geffen Playhouse?***

We say no to hundreds and hundreds of writers and yes to eight. Since I am well aware of the blood, sweat and tears that go into creating a play, saying no feels brutal. It's also hard when you fall madly in love with a play but it doesn't fit into the season.

### ***What do you find most meaningful?***

Encouraging writers to find the play they want to write – what I give to a writer is as important as what I give to an audience – and participating in bringing a play to life that I believe has the capacity to start a conversation, change a mind or simply stay with someone. ■

## SECTION 4

# POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Depending on the time available and members' interests, guide your group to respond to the questions suggested below. Encourage everyone to participate, while having respect for differing opinions. Individuals can share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Then, ask for a volunteer to share their group's answers with the larger group.

- Overall, how did you feel while watching the play? Engaged? Provoked? Put off? Moved? Bored? Entertained? What made you feel this way?
- What was the most memorable moment in the production? Describe it in detail.
- What did you learn about feminism? Has your attitude toward feminism been altered? If so, how, and why?
- What distinguished each character involved in the seminar? How did she speak, listen, and respond in ways that were unique to her?
- What did you appreciate about the performances? Share the details.
- What were the pivotal plot points?
- If you could give one character advice about how to live a fulfilling life, which one would you choose and what would you say?
- How did the set, props, costumes, and lighting contribute to the impact of the play?
- How would you describe in 2-3 sentences what the play is about to someone who has never seen it?



# NOTES



## SECTION 5

# RESOURCES

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**WATCH & LISTEN** to playwright Gina Gionfriddo and the original cast at the Huntington Theater in Boston discuss *Rapture, Blister, Burn* at [tinyurl.com/RBBTalk](http://tinyurl.com/RBBTalk).

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**LEARN ABOUT** the history of feminism in the United States in *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* by Estelle B. Freedman (Ballantine Books, 2002) and *A History of U.S. Feminisms* by Rory Dicker (Seal Press, 2008).

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**LEARN ABOUT** feminists from around the globe, by consulting primary source materials offered by *The Essential Feminist Reader*, edited by Estelle B. Freedman (The Modern Library, 2007).

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**LEARN ABOUT** the beliefs, work and life of Phyllis Schlafly at [eagleforum.org](http://eagleforum.org).

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**LEARN ABOUT** addiction at the American Society of Addiction Medicine website [tinyurl.com/ASAM-defined](http://tinyurl.com/ASAM-defined).

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**VISIT** the National Women’s History Museum online at [nwhm.org](http://nwhm.org).

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