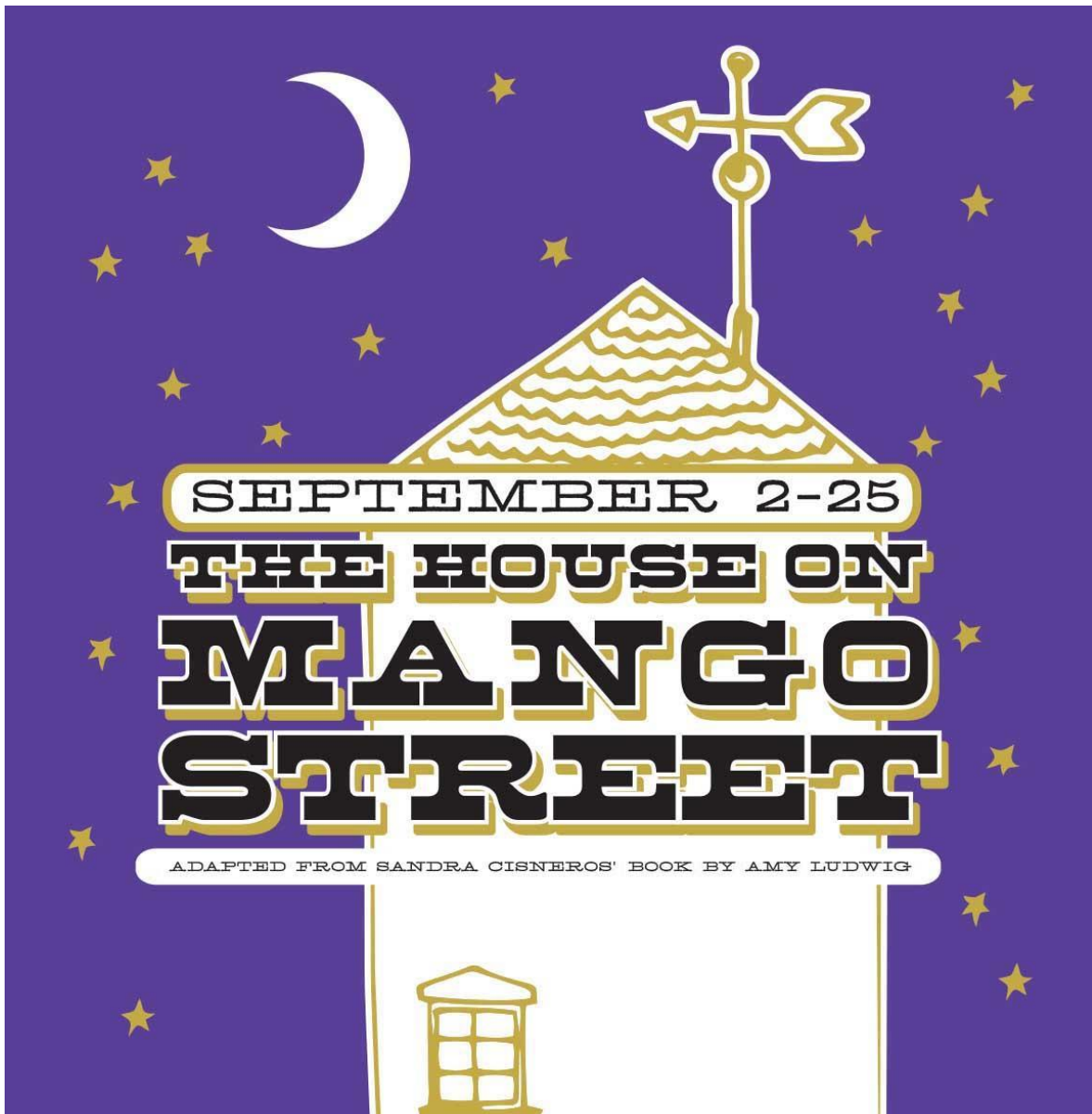


THE **Classic Theatre**
SAN ANTONIO



The House on Mango Street

Study Guide

This Study Guide was written by Kacey Roye and edited by Diane Malone, with selected excerpts from public domain.

Show Runs: September 2 - September 25, 2016

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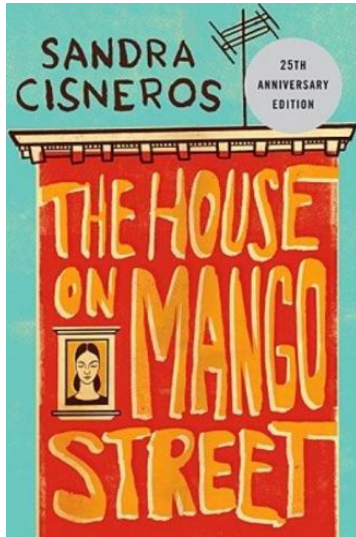
Email Director of Education Kacey Roye for more information:
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AIM High interns, Rebekka Broyles & Luis Flores in rehearsal and performance in *The Seagull*, 2016



Synopsis



Based on Sandra Cisneros' award-winning novel, this production of *The House on Mango Street* tells the coming-of-age story about a young girl named Esperanza. The playwright, Amy Ludwig, captures the mood and non-linear style of the original book through a series of vignettes. The role of Esperanza is played by two actors, one portraying her as an older woman, and one as a young girl. Six other actors play myriad roles changing quickly from one character to another.

Cover of Sandra Cisneros' 1984 Novel.

Act One: As a little girl, Esperanza Cordero has always moved from one house to another, and she desperately hopes that her father will finally buy the house of her dreams. Instead, he buys a house on Mango Street. As a new resident in this Chicago neighborhood, Esperanza hopes she will make friends and begin to feel at home quickly. Her experiences resemble those of many young people during that stage of life between childhood and adolescence. She enjoys the innocent games, fantasies and friendships of childhood, but soon she and her friends begin to experiment with high heels, makeup, and boys. Esperanza observes those around her, listens to their stories, and learns about beauty, fear, life, death, and loss. She goes to a dance, finds a first job, and begins to mature.

Act Two: Esperanza continues to navigate the challenges of growing up and begins to form her own identity. On Mango Street, Esperanza oscillates between the girlish fun of skipping rope and confronting more mature issues of sexuality and death. Throughout her experiences, she finds herself both fascinated and repelled by the world of adults. Esperanza realizes that Mango Street will always be a part of her. Near the end of the play, an older woman takes her aside and says, “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are.” When the play comes to an end, the audience has witnessed Esperanza’s transformation from a youthful girl to a self-aware adolescent. This formative year in Esperanza’s life is riddled with hardship, but is simultaneously balanced with laughter, joy, and a developing sense of independence.

About Sandra Cisneros



Sandra Cisneros was the only daughter in a family of six boys. Her family moved frequently between Chicago and Mexico City as her father took different jobs. Cisneros' mother was her strongest positive female influence, as she encouraged Sandra to read and continue her education. Cisneros began writing poems at the age of ten, and later attended Loyola College and then the Iowa Writers' Workshop. At Iowa she began writing about her own unique experiences instead of trying to imitate the primarily white male voices of the traditional literary canon. Cisneros is best known for *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. She has become a leading figure of the Chicano literary movement, and has founded both the Macondo Foundation, an association of socially engaged writers that now makes its home at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, and the Alfredo Cisneros Del Moral Foundation, a grant-giving institution serving Texas writers. She was Writer in Residence at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio. Currently, she lives with "many creatures, little and large," in central Mexico.

Facts About the Play & Playwright

- *The House on Mango Street*, first published in 1984, won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award in 1985 and has sold over six million copies since its initial publication and is still selling strongly.
- Cisneros' 1905 home at 735 E. Guenther St., in the historic King William neighborhood in San Antonio, Texas, was once the source of controversy when she painted it purple in the '90s (and is now a lovely shade of rosa Mexicana). It was listed for sale at \$910,000 in 2011.
- Sandra Cisneros' early life was a subject she would later draw on as a writer in books like *The House on Mango Street*. She was the only daughter among seven brothers in her family. The story also is about the subject of migration, and about the struggles of her life during it, which included poverty, as well as misogyny.
- *The House on Mango Street* received mostly positive reviews when it was published in 1984, and it has sold more than two million copies worldwide. However, some male Mexican-American critics have attacked the novel, arguing that by writing about a character whose goal is to leave the barrio (a neighborhood or community where most of the residents are of Spanish-speaking origin), Cisneros has betrayed the barrio, which they see as an important part of Mexican tradition.
- Cisneros plays on her dual Mexican-American heritage throughout her work, and *The House on Mango Street* in particular reflects the experience of Mexicans in the United States.
- The role of women within the history of the Hispanic community is significant. Although in *The House on Mango Street* and other works by Cisneros, some Mexican American women are portrayed as trapped within a cycle of socialization, Cisneros noted in a 1992 interview in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*, "I have to say that the traditional role is kind of a myth. The traditional Mexican woman is a fierce woman. There's a lot of victimization but we are also fierce. We are very fierce."
- Cisneros founded the Macondo Writers' Workshop, which provided socially conscious workshops for writers. The Macondo Foundation's uncertain future is a big part of the reason Cisneros says she wanted to leave San Antonio, stating "I've learned that I can be a philanthropist or a writer, but I can't do both. My face can be on the bucket, but I can no longer fry the chicken."

Analysis of Major Themes

Identity

What tools do we use to define ourselves? How much do our heritage, family and neighborhood contribute to personal identity? Cisneros has said that she began writing *The House on Mango Street* after reading about "the poetics of space" at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. There, she learned that everyone in the class but she understood their consciousness in terms of "house" metaphors--the "house" of memory, with its different rooms, for example. Cisneros, who moved repeatedly as a child and never really felt that she belonged to the dingy houses she lived in, rejected these ideas. However, *Mango* is very much about the search for identity, as symbolized by Esperanza's ties to Mango Street. When she is ashamed of her house, she is ashamed of herself. "This is not my house," she says to Alicia. "I don't belong here. I don't ever want to come from here. I don't want people to know I'm from here." However, by the play's conclusion, she has found her own real strength and has also come to accept that the house is part of her. *The House on Mango Street* teaches us the importance of embracing our roots, but also of realizing our personal potential.

Responsibility

The House on Mango Street is often referred to as a coming-of-age tale. What does "coming-of-age" actually mean? Does it mean simply moving from childhood to adolescence? Or does it also imply the taking of responsibility? At the start of the play, we see Esperanza skipping rope and riding bikes with her friends, but as the play progresses, we see her embrace a certain level of responsibility for the people around her- from her friends and family, to her larger community. We also begin to see her take responsibility for her own hopes and dreams. This process is not always an easy one, and Esperanza is not ready to feel the weight of responsibility placed on her shoulders. "Why me?" Esperanza asks when her father tells her she must inform her siblings of abuelito's death. "Because you are the oldest," he replies. "You're almost a woman now. Casi casi."

Gender

How much of Esperanza's story is influenced by gender? What parts of *The House on Mango Street* are universal and what parts are specifically geared towards a female's experience? All three girls are instantly transformed when they slip on high heels. "Look at my legs!" Rachel yells. "They are long like a train car." In the high heels, Esperanza and her friends feel like women for the first time. At first, there is nothing dangerous about the dress-up game, until they are approached by an older man. "Rachel," the man says, "You are prettier than a yellow taxi cab. You know what?! If I give you a dollar, will you kiss me?" Self-awareness is a fundamental key in growing up. In this moment, Esperanza and her friends are suddenly made aware of the fact that they are growing up, and how they appear to the outside world.

As Esperanza looks out Mango Street, she notices a disturbing trend: many of the women are trapped. Mamacita, who cannot speak English, Rafaela who cannot leave her house on Tuesdays, and Alicia, who must cook and clean for her father- all inspire Esperanza to become her own person. She rejects the idea that a man must carve her own path and vows never to be the kind of woman who spends her life looking out a window.

Esperanza's promise to herself is a firm stance against *machismo*- a Spanish word for masculine pride, which usually results in the objectification and control over woman. Machismo can present itself in several ways, from catcalls on the street, to discrimination in the workplace.



Alternate cover of Sandra Cisneros' 1984 novel



The Steppenwolf Theatre's 2009 Production of *The House on Mango Street*

Cast of Characters

Older Esperanza	Gypsy Pantoja
Younger Esperanza	Valentina Inéz Barrera - Ybarra
Woman #1	María Ibarra
Woman #2	Eraina Porras
Woman #3	Arianna Angeles
Man #1	Salvador Valadez
Man #2	Gabriel Sánchez
Man #3	Joshua Segovia
Understudy for Woman #3	*Grace Lamberson

Production Staff

Director	Jose Ruben De Leon
Stage Manager	Kaitlin Muse
Assistant Stage Manager	*Rebekka Broyles
Production Manager	John Coker
Set Designer	Allan S. Ross
Light Designer	Pedro Ramirez
Prop Designer	George Burnette
Costume Designer	Jodi Karjala
Sound Designer	Rick Malone
Technical Director	Rick Clyde
Musician	Nicholas Valdez
Board Operator	Scott Marker

*** AIM High interns**

Classic Theatre Staff

Kelly Roush:
Executive Director

Diane Malone
Allan S. Ross:
Artistic Directors

Kacey Royce:
Education Director

Florence Bunten:
Box Office

Olivia Tober:
Bookkeeper

Rita Duggan:
House Manager

Lesson Ideas / Activities

“Tossing Lines”

Objective

The purpose of this activity is to familiarize students with *The House on Mango Street* by exposing them to lines spoken in the play. Based on these lines, students are to make predictions about the play’s characters and central conflicts and discuss these predictions. This activity helps students form questions, gain insight, and build excitement for seeing and hearing these lines acted out on stage.

“Tossing Lines” serves the students best if completed before they attend the play.

Time Allotted Materials:

20-30 minutes Tennis ball or hackey-sack

Slips of paper cut from Tossing Lines on the following page

Procedure

Cut out the slips of paper printed on the following page and distribute them to volunteers. Give students a few minutes (or overnight, if appropriate) to practice or memorize their lines. When they’re ready, have these students form a circle and give one student the ball. After she speaks her line, the student tosses the ball to another student who speaks his assigned line. Students toss the ball across the circle until all lines have been heard a few times. Encourage students to speak lines with varying emotions, seeking out a variety of ways to perform the lines.

Optional:

Reassign lines within the group and continue for another round.

Discussion Questions:

1. Where and when do you think this play takes place? Which lines support your ideas?
2. Can you predict what themes might be present in this production based on the lines you’ve heard? What might be the central conflict? Which lines support your ideas?
3. What do these lines tell you about the characters? Which lines support your ideas?
4. Based on these lines, what images come to mind? What do you expect to see visually during the production?



“The house on Mango Street is ours, and we don't have to pay rent to anybody...or be careful not to make too much noise...”

“If I give you a dollar will you kiss me?”

“You live there?”

"It made your blood freeze to have somebody look at you like that."

“The neighborhood is getting bad.”

“Until then I am a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor.”

“We could be friends.”

“I have never seen my Papa cry.”

“You must remember to keep writing, Esperanza....It will keep you free.”

“Good lucky you didn't come yesterday. The planets were all mixed up yesterday.”

“They never knew about the two-room flats and sleeping rooms he rented...”

“I had lots of job offers when I was young, but I never took them.”

“I don't cross the street like the other girls. Straight ahead, straight eyes.”

“And it doesn't matter how new the dress Mama bought is because my feet are ugly...”

Post Play Discussion Questions

1. In the play we meet two versions of Esperanza: Esperanza as a child and teen, and Esperanza as an adult with life experience and perspective. We often hear the two characters comment on the same situation although each of the Esperanzas interprets the situation differently. Why has the playwright chosen to present both? Do you like this approach? Why or why not? Does it provide you with a deeper understanding of the situation? How? Consider an event in your past that carries some significance to you. Have your ideas, feelings, beliefs about that event changed as you have grown? How have they changed? Why?

2. What makes up Esperanza's identity, both in her past, as the younger self, and in her present, as the older self? How big a role does each of the following play in creating this identity: Her family? Her neighborhood? Her culture? Her gender? Her race? Her social class? What else contributes to the construction of her identity? Of these, which contributes most significantly?

3. The idea of "place" is central to the play. How is "place" different from "home"? How does the playwright create "place"? Is home a part of place or is place a part of home? Explain. How do you see your place? How much of your home is a part of your place?

4. In the beginning of Act I, Esperanza introduces the audience to her neighborhood. She says, "Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared." What does she mean by this? Do we, as a diverse society, fear that which is different? Why? Does the media play a role in creating this fear? How? If we are indeed conditioned to fear those who are different from us, who does that conditioning? Why? Is isolation a form of control? Why or why not?

5. The idea of shame is carried throughout the play. Esperanza feels shame about her house, her clothes, her family, her culture, and her body. What or who creates a feeling of shame? How does one learn to feel ashamed? Consider a time you felt shame. What was at the root of the feeling of shame? Are the feelings of shame and the fear of inadequacy connected?

6. The character of Alicia decides to go to college. This act isolates her from her friends. Why does this happen? How is education linked to social class? What assumptions are often made about people who have little formal education? Where do those assumptions come from? Is formal education necessary if one wants to be educated? Why or why not?

7. Consider the scene with Geraldo. In speaking about Geraldo after his death, Older Esperanza says, "They never saw the kitchenettes. They never knew about the two-room flats and sleeping rooms he rented, the weekly money orders sent home, the currency exchange. How could they?" Explain what she means in these lines. Who is "they"? The U.S. is currently facing an immigration "crisis" along its Mexican border. How does Older Esperanza's statement relate to this current event?

8. Esperanza speaks about her brown saddle shoes throughout the play. Consider the scene where she dances with her Papa. How are the saddle shoes a metaphor for Esperanza's life? As an adult what shoe might she be today? What shoe are you?

9. Why is it significant that Esperanza and her friends are given high-heeled shoes to wear? What does this indicate?

10. Are the women portrayed in this play trapped by their gender? If so, how? What does Esperanza mean when she says that the street has too many women looking out of the windows? Were the males and the females treated differently from each other in the play? Were some males forgiven for a transgression because of their gender, and were some of the females blamed because of their gender? Justify your answer with evidence from the play. Is the practice of excusing or blaming behavior based on gender (e.g. "boys will be boys") still prevalent in present day society?

11. At the end of the play the two Esperanzas reflect on Esperanza leaving the neighborhood. Where is she going? Both Esperanzas reflect on the past and state that they/she didn't always live on Mango Street but lived in other places. What does she/they mean by this? How does Esperanza's departure reflect her growth? Does growth require sacrifice? Always? What does Esperanza sacrifice? What does she mean when she says that, "They will not know I have gone away to come back." Can you identify ways that this is true in your life or in the lives of those who are close to you?

Theatre Etiquette

Going to a play is a special experience, one that you will remember for a long time. Everyone in the audience has been looking forward to seeing the performance. A production team puts in many long hours and a lot of hard work to mount a performance for an audience. If you keep in mind common courtesy for the performers as well as your fellow audience members, everyone's theatre experience will be optimized. What follows are a few reminders for attending the theatre.

1. Plan to arrive thirty minutes before the performance begins.
2. Gum, food, drinks, or candy, are never allowed in the theatre.
3. Please go to the bathroom before seating for performance or at intermission.
4. TURN OFF ALL cell phones, or anything else that can disturb the production, actors and the audience members during the performance. It is very impolite to have your phone go off during the show.
5. Lights will dim just before a performance and then go dark. Show your knowledge by sitting quietly and calmly.
6. Do not talk or whisper during the performance. The actors on stage can hear you, which is why you can hear them so well. Laughter is of course permissible at appropriate times.
7. Keep body movements to a minimum. You can't get up and move around during the performance.
8. No taking of pictures or video recording is allowed.
9. Don't leave your seat until the cast has taken their curtain call at the end.
10. Show your appreciation by clapping. The actors love to hear applause. This shows how much you enjoyed the performance!