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FOR TEACHERS

The student matinee performance of Fun Home will be held on Thursday, October 25, 2018 at 11:00 am, at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts. The expected runtime is approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes, with no intermission. The performance will be followed by a discussion with actors from the show.

Student audiences are often the most rewarding and demanding audiences that an acting ensemble can face. Since we hope every show at TheatreWorks will be a positive experience for both audience and cast, we ask you to familiarize your students with the theatre etiquette described below.

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

As the audience, you are a part of the production, helping the actors onstage tell the story.

When the performance is about to begin, the lights will dim. This is a signal for the actors and the audience to put aside concerns and conversation and settle into the world of the play.

The performers expect the audience’s full attention and focus. Performance is a time to think inwardly, not a time to share your thoughts aloud. Talking to neighbors (even in whispers) carries easily to others in the audience and to the actors on stage. It is disruptive and distracting.

Food is not allowed in the theatre. Soda, candy, and other snacks are noisy and therefore distracting. Please keep these items on the bus or throw them away before you enter the audience area. Backpacks are not allowed in the theatre.

Walking through the aisles during the performance is extremely disruptive. Actors occasionally use aisles and stairways as exits and entrances. The actors will notice any movement in the performance space. Please use the restroom and take care of all other concerns outside before the show.

Cell phones and other electronic devices must be turned off before the performance begins. Do not text during the performance, as it is distracting to the audience members around you.
SUICIDE IN FUN HOME

On July 2, 1980, Bruce Bechdel was struck and killed by a truck off Route 150 in his hometown of Beech Creek, Pennsylvania. Though his death was not officially ruled a suicide there is good reason to suspect that this is the case, owing to the facts that his daughter Alison had recently come out as a lesbian, he had hidden his own homosexuality throughout his life, and his wife Helen had asked him for a divorce.

In the graphic novel, Alison grapples with whether Bruce really did take his own life. In the musical, his suicide is more or less accepted as fact.

Suicide is a difficult subject for anyone, but we know there are students in our community for whom it may be especially triggering. Please make sure your students are aware ahead of time that Bruce’s suicide is an important part of the story, and make appropriate accommodations for anyone who might need them.
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Alison Bechdel’s autobiographical graphic novel *Fun Home* is the basis for the musical of the same name. In both tellings, Alison’s memories are pieced together in a kind of *stream of consciousness*, rather than unfolding chronologically.

In the graphic novel, memories from Bechdel’s life are presented with *commentary in the form of captions* written by adult Alison, who possesses a lifetime of experiences that color her interpretation of the events. Lisa Kron, who wrote the book and lyrics for the musical, calls the captions the narrative voice, “Our source for this inside information […] which points out every instance of delusion, denial, hypocrisy, and retroactive irony.”

For the musical, that narrative voice comes to life as a flesh-and-blood character: the 43-year-old cartoonist Alison. The Alison we see onstage is actively mining through her own childhood and adolescence as she drafts her memoir, reliving past events and assigning significance to them while we watch.

**As memories are conjured, two other actors appear onstage as Alison at different times in her life.** Small Alison is roughly nine years old; Medium Alison is a college freshman. Neither Small Alison nor Medium Alison are aware of events that happen later in Bechdel’s life—as far as they’re concerned, the events that unfold around them are taking place in the present.
ALISON: 43 years old, a cartoonist
Alison is a truth-seeker, delving back into her memories to understand her father and come to terms with his suicide. She is not narrating past events for the benefit of an audience, rather reliving them for her own journey toward understanding.

MEDIUM ALISON: 19 years old, a college freshman
College opens up a world of possibilities for Medium Alison, allowing her to understand and define herself in ways she hadn’t before.

SMALL ALISON: Around 9 years old
Resentful of the dresses and barrettes forced on her by her father, Small Alison does not fit in the mold society would prefer she conform to.

BRUCE BECHDEL: Alison’s father
Bruce is a high school English teacher, proprietor of the Bechdel Funeral Home, an avid antique collector and restorer, and a closeted homosexual.

HELEN BECHDEL: Alison’s mother

CHRISTIAN BECHDEL: Alison’s brother, around 10 years old

JOHN BECHDEL: Alison’s brother, around 6 years old

ROY: A young man Bruce hires to do yard work

MARK: A high school junior

PETE: A mourner

JOAN: A college student

BOBBY JEREMY and THE SUSAN DEYS: imaginary television characters

The roles of Roy, Mark, Pete, and Bobby Jeremy are performed by the same actor.

The Susan Deys are played by the actors playing Medium Alison and Joan.
SYNOPSIS

At her drafting table, Adult Alison jingles a ring of keys. Small Alison enters along with her father Bruce, both of them memories from Alison’s childhood. Small Alison begs her father to “play airplane,” but instead he shows her the haul he’s brought back from a neighbor’s barn—items considered “junk” by their owner, but treasures to Bruce. We learn that Adult Alison is planning to draw comics of her father, and is seeking out “real things to draw, because [she doesn’t] trust memory.” Eventually Bruce does play airplane with Small Alison, but abruptly ends the game and walks offstage. Adult Alison looks on, trying to come up with a caption for the scene we’ve just witnessed.

In the next scene, Bruce bursts in with the news that someone from the Allegheny Historical Society is coming to tour the Bechdel’s home, which he has painstakingly restored and filled with antiques. Suddenly flustered, Bruce goes upstairs to get ready while his wife Helen and the kids prepare the house. The family is on edge as Bruce gives the tour, unsure if they’ve managed to live up to his exacting standards. As the Bechdels pose for a family photo, Bruce’s attention shifts to the handsome young man who has just arrived to do yard work. Noting her father’s gaze, Adult Alison comes to the realization that even as the family scrambled to please him, in truth Bruce wanted something altogether different. Adult Alison captions the memory, and we learn that both Bruce and Alison are gay. Further, we’re told that Bruce will eventually take his own life, and that Alison will go on to become a lesbian cartoonist.

The scene shifts to a college dorm room where Medium Alison is on the phone with her father, discussing her classes and adjustment to college life. After the call ends, she begins writing in her journal. Adult Alison realizes how little Medium Alison knows of what’s to come.

Next we move to the Bechdel Funeral Home, which the kids call the Fun Home. Small Alison and her brothers are playing in the casket showroom, rehearsing a jingle they’ve written for an imaginary Fun Home commercial. Suddenly Bruce calls Small Alison into the back room, where he is preparing a cadaver. He asks her to hand him a pair of scissors, then dismisses her. Adult Alison ponders her father’s intentions, unsure why he chose that moment to show her her first dead body.

We briefly see Medium Alison approach her college’s Gay Union, but she loses her nerve when another young woman asks her if she’s going in. She leaves, praying “Please god, don’t let me be a lesbian.”

The action moves back to Alison’s childhood home, where the Bechdel children are helping their father with yard work. Helen returns home, and shortly thereafter a young man named Roy arrives. The kids follow him off when he leaves to go get his tools. Helen questions Bruce about him—Bruce says Roy is a former student, and that he’s hired Roy to help out. Later, we see Bruce show Roy around the house, offer him a drink, and then ask him to unbutton his shirt. Helen is in the other room, playing the piano.
Back at her dorm, Medium Alison is writing when a young woman named Joan enters—the same woman we saw her interact with in front of the Gay Union earlier. Joan notices a photo of Bruce, and as Alison begins to tell Joan about her father, she mentions that he’s sent her a book by Colette. Given the literature in question, Joan is impressed that Alison’s father is “cool with you being a dyke.” Medium Alison is shocked by the suggestion that he knows—she’s only just figured it out herself. Medium Alison confesses to having recently read Word is Out, realizing for the first time that she’s gay. Medium Alison and Joan share a moment, then Joan leaves.

We return to Alison’s childhood, as Small Alison is being forced to don a girly dress and patent leather shoes. Bruce tells her all the other girls will be wearing dresses, and that she’s free to change but everyone will talk about her behind her back. Disheartened, Small Alison agrees not to change “right now.”

Shifting back to college, Medium Alison tells Joan that she’s come out to her parents via letter. She feels emboldened by having put the words down on paper, but shrinks at Joan’s suggestion that they go to an event at the Women’s Collective, unsure whether she’ll fit in. Joan kisses Medium Alison, and she reciprocates. The two tumble into bed. Looking on, Adult Alison experiences “retroactive humiliation,” as Medium Alison is exhilarated by love and lust and a new understanding of herself.

In the next scene, Small Alison is working on a school project, illustrating all the places her family members have visited. Bruce says they are “visually confusing.” He argues that she needs to pick one place and make it beautiful, and begins to sketch their hometown, Beech Creek, Pennsylvania. Small Alison says she’d rather include the whole state. Bruce lashes out, telling her to go ahead and take her “half-baked mess” to school and embarrass herself. She takes his instead. Adult Alison reflects on his drawing, the small town where he lived and died, singing “I can draw a circle, you lived your life inside.”

In a brief scene, we see Bruce offer a young man a ride, then a beer, making small talk as they drive. Later, Bruce tells Small Alison he has to see a psychiatrist, because he does “dumb dangerous things.” We learn that Bruce has been arrested for “furnishing a malt beverage to a minor,” which Adult Alison calls a euphemism. Offstage, we hear Bruce fly into a rage. Small Alison and her brothers sing to themselves to drown out the fight.

Next, we see Bruce and the Bechdel children in a small Greenwich Village apartment, where they’re staying with a family friend while visiting New York. Fireworks explode outside as the children prepare for bed. It’s America’s Bicentennial, and there are ships (and sailors) in port from all over the world. With the kids in bed Bruce heads for the door. Small Alison sits up and asks him where he’s going. He tells her he’s going to get a newspaper; Adult Alison wonders where he really went that night.

Moving forward again, Medium Alison reads Joan the letter she’s just received from Bruce in response to her coming out. He says Helen is upset, but that he thinks everyone should experiment, that he doesn’t see the point of labels, and that he’d once thought about making a
stand, but he’s not a hero. Medium Alison is incensed, hurt that he would pretend to know anything about what she’s going through.

Back to Alison’s childhood, Small Alison and Bruce are in a diner. A delivery woman enters with a cart full of packages, and Small Alison is enraptured. The woman has short hair, wears dungarees and leather boots, swaggers, and carries a ring of keys. It is the first time Small Alison has encountered a woman like her, an “old-school butch.” It is a moment of recognition for Small Alison, a realization that she is not alone.

The scene shifts to Medium Alison, on the phone with her father. Bruce avoids discussing his letter, so Medium Alison asks to speak to Helen instead. Helen says she doesn’t want to meddle, but that she’s “uniquely qualified” to warn her daughter about “romanticizing this path.” Helen tells Medium Alison that Bruce has had affairs with men throughout their marriage, and that they narrowly escaped catastrophe on more than one occasion. Adult Alison recalls that from that point, she “blocked out everything that was happening at home.”

We then witness a heated argument between Bruce and Helen. Adult Alison captions the scene “I should have been paying attention.”

Next, Medium Alison and Joan arrive at the Bechdel home. Bruce dashes off on an errand, and Joan excuses herself to give Medium Alison and Helen some time to talk. Helen tells Medium Alison that Bruce has bought another old house, that he spends all his time out there working on it. She recounts how they’ve spent years living day to day, polishing and shining, “like chaos never happens if its never seen.” She advises Medium Alison not to give away her days.

In the other room, Bruce entertains Joan with stories from his youth. Medium Alison joins them, then Joan exits, leaving Medium Alison alone with Bruce. She asks him whether he knew she was gay when he sent her the book by Colette; he says he doesn’t know. Then, addressing Adult Alison for the first time, asks her to come along for a drive. There is so much Alison wants to say, but after a short exchange the ride is over and the conversation ends. Adult Alison sings, “That was our last night.”

Adult Alison throws herself into her work, drawing and trying to ignore Bruce as he recites snippets of letters he’s written her. Defiant, she demands to know why he stepped in front of a truck, and whether it had anything to do with her.

Bruce sings about the house he’s restoring—how fine it would be if not for the rotting foundation, peeling plaster, buckled roof. He admits that he’s scared, that his world has fallen apart, that he doesn’t know what he’s doing still standing here. And then we see headlights, hear a horn blaring, and Bruce is gone.

Adult Alison realizes she’s alone. All she has left of her father are her drawings, her memories. She remembers longing to connect with him—to play airplane, to find common ground. And in her memories, she finds him.

The end.
LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER: Comparing Bruce & Alison

At the beginning of *Fun Home*, as Alison begins to sketch remembrances of her childhood, the first two captions she considers are “My dad and I were exactly alike,” and “My dad and I were nothing alike.” Contradictory as they are, as the show unfolds we see evidence to support both statements.

In the diagram below, compare and contrast Alison and her father Bruce. Some things to consider: Their interests, their desires, the ways they present themselves to the world, how/whether they conform to society’s expectations.

Would you say Alison and Bruce have more similarities, or more differences? Why?

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ABOUT FUN HOME & ITS CREATORS

Graphic novelist Alison Bechdel, whose complicated childhood unfolds onstage in the musical Fun Home, first gained notoriety through her comic strip Dykes to Watch Out For, launched in 1983 and published regularly through 2008. The strip was among the earliest honest representations of lesbians in popular culture, and has been described as a countercultural institution. Though influential, her early work reached a niche audience. It was her debut graphic novel, Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, that put Bechdel in the national spotlight.

Published in 2006, Fun Home explores Bechdel’s coming-of-age and her relationship with her father. A project seven years in the making, Fun Home challenged the notion that graphic novels were somehow a lesser form of literature and offered a new form for the classic memoir. The literary world took note, and the book appeared on The New York Times Bestseller List. It was also named among the best books of 2006 by countless institutions, was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award, and won a Will Eisner Comic Industry Award.

One of the early fans of the book was award-winning playwright Lisa Kron. Like Bechdel, Kron’s work was often autobiographical. Years earlier, Kron had been a regular at the WOW Cafe, a creative venue for women in the East Village, and co-founder of The Five Lesbian Brothers, a theatre company known for their outrageously witty, satirical takes on life from a feminist, lesbian perspective. In Bechdel’s Fun Home, Kron saw what few would have dreamed possible—the source material for a Broadway musical.

With Bechdel’s blessing, Kron teamed up with composer Jeanine Tesori to adapt the graphic novel for the stage. Tesori is the most decorated female composer on Broadway; prior to Fun Home, Tesori already had four Tony nominations under her belt, and was the first female composer to have two new shows running concurrently on Broadway. Recently, Tesori collaborated with David Henry Hwang to write Soft Power, produced by Los Angeles’ Center Theatre Group and the Curran Theater in San Francisco.

Kron and Tesori spent years developing Fun Home for the stage. The musical had its first reading in 2009, and after further development, premiered off-Broadway in the fall of 2013. In the spring of 2015, Fun Home transferred to Broadway. It was nominated for twelve Tony Awards, winning five, including Best Musical. Notably, Kron and Tesori became the first all-female writing team to win a Tony for Best Original Score.

A groundbreaking work, both poignant and innovative, Fun Home has since toured the country, been produced internationally, and now makes itself right at home on TheatreWorks’ stage.
SETTLENG

Because *Fun Home* takes place during different times in Alison’s life, there are distinct settings associated with different eras. Small Alison’s scenes unfold primarily in the small town of Beech Creek, mostly at their home, though there are also scenes at the Bechdel Funeral Home and at a local diner.

Beech Creek is a borough in Clinton County in central Pennsylvania. In 1970, around the time we see Small Alison, the population was just 634 people. The borough has a total land area of 0.56 square miles. Small Alison is seen away from Beech Creek in just one scene, when the family visits New York City.

The Bechdel home is described as a gothic revival, restored by Bruce and filled with antiques. The roofline in TheatreWorks’ set is inspired by Bechdel’s own drawings of the house.

Medium Alison’s scenes take place primarily at Oberlin College in 1980. Oberlin is the oldest coeducational liberal arts college in the country, located in Oberlin, Ohio. It was also the first US college to admit African Americans, and since its founding has been associated with progressive causes. Though it’s less than 300 miles from her hometown, the campus experience is radically different than life in Beech Creek, and gives Medium Alison a sense of freedom she never had at home.
In *Fun Home* and in real life, Bruce Bechdel was a high school English teacher. Alison was once one of his students, and even after she’s gone off to college Bruce continues to send her books. Early in the musical they converse about her Modern Classics course, and bemoan the interpretations of her professor. Literature is a common language for them, when so much else is difficult to talk about.

Through books, Bruce and Alison come to better understand themselves. There are two works cited in the script that prove to be formational to Alison. The first is *Word is Out: Some Stories of Our Lives*. The book is a transcript of the 1977 documentary of the same name, featuring interviews with 26 gay men and women. Alison picked it up in a downtown bookstore, and reading it led her to the revelation that she, herself, is gay. Also significant is a work by Colette, sent to Alison by her father before she came out. Colette, a French novelist who famously had lesbian affairs, is best known for her novella *Gigi*. Joan immediately assumes Bruce is supportive of Alison based on the reading material he’s sent her. At the time Alison doesn’t think he knows she’s a lesbian, but later questions whether he suspected all along.

In the musical, Bruce references James Joyce a number of times. After Alison comes out he wants to discuss Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, saying she “better damn well identify with every page.” Near the end, he says he’s just reread *Araby*, one of Joyce’s short stories. The graphic novel is mired in literary allusions, Joyce in particular is referenced in many of the chapter titles.

**Connections**

1. Ask your students to think about literary works that have had an impact on them. Have them write an essay about a book that taught them something about themselves, or gave them a greater understanding of the world around them.

2. The graphic novel *Fun Home* is itself an important piece of literature. Have your students read it, and identify literary references in Bechdel’s writing. Working in groups, ask them to choose one writer or work to investigate, and share with the class the significance of the work and why they think Bechdel included it in *Fun Home*.

3. Literature was a common bond for Bruce and Alison, something that brought them together despite their differences. Ask your students to think about a common bond they share with a parent or other adult, and write a journal entry about the way that shared interest impacts their relationship.

4. There is a new movie about Colette out in theatres now. Offer students extra credit if they see the movie and write an essay about what Colette’s work might have meant to the Bechdels.
REFERENCES IN THE SCRIPT

The following is a collection of terms, works, people, and pop culture references are made in the *Fun Home* musical:

**Red Baron in his Sopwith Camel:** A famous German fighter pilot, and the iconic biplane fighter aircraft used during WWI. Small Alison says she wants to fly like the Red Baron when she asks Bruce to play airplane with her.

**The Sun Also Rises:** A 1926 novel by Ernest Hemingway. Medium Alison's Modern Classics course reads the book, and she and Bruce discuss it as well.

**Norman Bates:** The main antagonist from *Psycho*. Medium Alison says people looked at her like she was Norman Bates when she told them her family runs a funeral home.

**Mrs. Warren’s Profession:** A 1893 play by George Bernard Shaw about a former prostitute, now a madam, coming to terms with her disapproving daughter. Helen is in a local production of the show.

**Uta Hagen:** An American actress, theatre practitioner, and acting teacher. Before she had children, Helen Bechdel studied under Uta Hagen in New York.

**Herbie/The Love Bug:** Herbie is a sentient Volkswagen Beetle, the main character in the 1968 film *The Love Bug*. The Bechdel children talk to Roy about the movie.

**William Morris:** A nineteenth century British designer associated with the British Arts and Crafts movement. Bruce shows off the William Morris wallpaper in the library.

**Chopin:** A piano composer of the Romantic era. Small Alison makes a joke about his name; Helen corrects her pronunciation.

**Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette:** A Nobel Prize-nominated French writer, controversial in part because of her lesbian relationships. Bruce sends Alison a copy of her work when she is in college, leading to the question of whether he already suspected she was gay.

**Toulouse-Latrec:** A French painter and illustrator, famous for his depictions of Paris in the late 19th century. When Medium Alison suggests Bruce sent Colette simply to teach her about the Paris arts scene, Joan points out he could have sent Toulouse-Latrec instead.

**Word is Out:** A collection of interviews with gay men and women, made into a documentary in 1977 and published as a book in 1978. Medium Alison reads the book and realizes she identifies with the interviewees, leading to the revelation that she is gay.

*Continues on next page...*
**A Chorus Line:** A 1975 Broadway musical about a group of dancers auditioning for spots on a chorus line. We see the Bechdel children looking through a Playbill from *A Chorus Line* during their visit to New York, giggling about some of the more salacious lyrics, “Shit, Ritchie” and “tits and ass.”

**Bicentennial:** The two-hundredth anniversary of an event. The Bechdel family visits New York during America’s Bicentennial, July 4, 1976.

**Village Voice:** An alternative weekly newspaper covering news and culture in New York City. When the Bechdels visit New York, the Greenwich Village apartment they stay in has a basket full of *Village Voices.*

**Rotary Club:** An international service organization with thousands of chapters worldwide. Bruce reads in the paper that someone he knows is running for city council, but that he didn’t mention it at Rotary, implying that Bruce himself must also be a member.

**Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:** A 1916 novel by James Joyce. When Medium Alison calls to discuss Bruce’s response to her coming out he tries to deflect the conversation, asking her instead if she’s read Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist* yet.

**Daniel Putnam Brinley:** An American muralist and painter. In a rage, Bruce throws one of Brinley’s works down the stairs, destroying the painting.

**Jean Stafford and Robert Lowell/Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath:** Two married couples. In both cases, husband and wife were famous authors. In both cases, the wives were victims of abuse. Bruce and Medium Alison sing lyrics of their own invention about Stafford, Lowell, Hughes, and Plath to the tune of “Heart and Soul.”

**Garry Winogrand:** A famous street photographer. Bruce sent Alison a “Winogrand article” near the end of his life.

**Araby:** A 1914 short story by James Joyce. Bruce re-read it shortly before his death.

**William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway:** Famous American authors. Alison recalls Bruce calling her up to tell her how she’s supposed to feel about Faulkner or Hemingway.
STONEWALL AND BEYOND: 
Acceptance of Homosexuals During Bruce & Alison’s Lifetimes

In *Fun Home*, Bruce Bechdel confesses to his daughter Alison, “I’ll admit I’m somewhat envious of the ‘new’ freedom that appears on campuses today,” referring to the freedom queer students had in 1980. This quote comes from a letter in the graphic novel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, which continued, “In the fifties it was not even considered an option... Yes, my world was quite limited.”

The world was indeed quite limited for a gay man like Bruce, born in 1936. For most of the twentieth century, queer people lacked safe spaces. There were select gay neighborhoods in large cities, like The Castro in San Francisco; Dupont Circle in Washington, DC; or Greenwich Village in New York. Yet without and even within these communities, finding other queer people was risky. Police prowled parks and restrooms where people cruised for sex. Gay bars and bathhouses could be raided or shut down. In the early 1950s, the Lavender Scare saw over 400 gay public servants lose their jobs because the government considered their sexuality a security risk. Identifying fellow queer people meant identifying ambiguous signs. Is that man’s lisp intentional or is it a speech impediment? What about his limp wrist? Do those two women live together for economic reasons or are they partners? Does she eschew makeup because of the expense or is she like me? Identifying such signifiers correctly could mean finding a friend, a lover, or even just a reminder one was not alone. Getting it wrong could mean embarrassment, losing one’s job, or physical assault.

Alison Bechdel, born in 1960, grew up in a radically different world. As the sexual revolution swept the country in the 1960s, gay rights groups mobilized, publically confronting officials about discriminatory laws, drawing from the tumult of the Vietnam War protests and the Civil Rights Movement. On June 28, 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village. Per protocol, patrons were made to produce identification and female police officers took those in dresses into bathrooms to verify their sex. Cross dressers and trans women were arrested. A crowd of bystanders outside the bar grew to a few hundred people, who applauded those arrested as they were loaded into police wagons. An altercation broke out and a butch lesbian beseeched the crowd, “Why don’t you guys do something?” The subsequent rioting lasted three hours and recurred the following night, sparking the modern gay rights movement. In the 1970s, gay people were elected to public office and queer student groups proliferated across colleges. Queer people could walk openly with pride as they hadn’t before.

The Bechdels visit New York after the Stonewall Riots, and in the graphic novel, Alison wonders, “Might not a lingering vibration, a quantum particle of rebellion, still have hung in the humectant air” she walked through? She would come out to her family years later, in 1980.

"Here was my dad, growing up with this sexual difference in this tiny rural town and here I was, growing up in that same town. Because of our different historical positions, I was able to go on, be out and have a full life and he absolutely wasn't."

– Alison Bechdel, in a 2016 interview

*Written by Cameron Wells*
GENDER EXPRESSION & SEXUAL ORIENTATION

In *Fun Home*, both Alison and Bruce are attracted to members of their own sex. Alison unequivocally declares herself a lesbian; though we know Bruce has affairs with men, he resists labeling himself. Also significant, Alison prefers to don traditionally masculine clothes and hairstyle.

It would be easy to equate Alison’s “butchness” to the fact that she’s a lesbian, but sexual orientation and gender expression are two different things. Society’s understanding of gender and sexuality has come a long way in recent years, but sometimes the concepts and distinctions can be confusing. The chart below, put together by The Trevor Project, can help.

The way a person dresses is simply a component of their gender expression, and is not necessarily any indication of their sexual orientation. Although for Alison, choosing to wear traditionally masculine clothing factors into her identity as a lesbian, that doesn’t mean that every woman who dresses that way is gay. Further, it doesn’t mean that women who dress in traditionally feminine garb are straight.

In general, society has expected people to conform to either the far left side of this chart, or the far right side. Conflict can arise when a person’s presentation or sexual orientation isn’t in line with their biological sex. This conflict may be external, with people who don’t understand or don’t approve, or internal, when a person feels guilt or pressure to hide. In Bruce Bechdel’s case, decades of hiding his true self ended up costing him his life.

Connections

1. Where do you think Alison and Bruce fall on these spectrums? What about other characters, like Joan and Roy? Consider whether your answers are based on their own statements about themselves, or your assumptions.

2. What do you make of Bruce’s unwillingness to label his sexual orientation? In general, do you think labels are useful, or limiting? Why?
REPRESENTATION

*Fun Home* is often lauded as the first musical with a lesbian protagonist. In reality *The Color Purple* came earlier, but is overlooked perhaps because Celie's sexuality is less a defining characteristic in that show. In any case, any time a work is tauted as “the first” to include a certain minority group, it calls attention to the many, many years that members of that population have had to wait to see lives like theirs portrayed in mainstream media.

Representation, or the way in which factors like gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation are presented in the media, is a frequent topic of conversation these days. For groups whose stories seldom appear on film, television, or on stage, seeing actors like them can be incredibly affirming, a cause for celebration. Recent high-profile examples in film include *Black Panther* and *Crazy Rich Asians*.

While representation in Hollywood has generated a lot of conversation and some positive change in the last few years, it is by no means a new concept. Perhaps the best-known metric for assessing a film’s representation of women is the Bechdel Test (see sidebar), which dates back to a 1985 comic penned by Alison Bechdel in her strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Bechdel credits her friend Liz Wallace for the idea, who in turn was inspired by Virginia Woolf’s 1929 essay, *A Room of One’s Own*.

As audiences and media critics become more discerning, many have called for new metrics for assessing representation in media. Beyond gender, how (or does) a work represent racial minorities, or people of different sexual orientations? What about the people behind the camera or those onstage—the writers, the directors, the designers, etc.?

As audience members, we have the power to choose what media we consume. Actively engaging with stories told by and about different minority groups, whether you’re a part of those groups or not, is one way to help widen your own perspective, and sharing your experiences can help grow awareness.

Connections

1. Is representation something you take into account when you decide which movies to see, which shows to watch, which books to read? Why or why not?

2. Do an internet search for “beyond the Bechdel test,” and you’ll find several articles discussing new metrics for assessing representation. What factors are most important to you? If you were tasked with creating a new test, what would the rules be?

THE BECHDEL TEST

“I only go to a movie if it satisfies three basic requirements. ONE, it has to have at least two women in it, who, TWO, talk to each other about, THREE, something besides a man.”
WHAT WE TAKE AWAY

Arianna Rice, the Assistant Director of TheatreWorks’ production, wrote her master’s thesis about the Fun Home. As a part of her research, Rice reached out to others who had seen the show, and asked them to describe what it was about.

The following excerpt highlights the way various audience members interpreted the same production:

“My first respondent, a straight woman, stated, ‘I think the show is about self-discovery. I also think it’s about putting one’s past together.’ Her response was different to my second respondent, a straight man, who said, ‘I think the show is about dealing with grief and finding identity both within and apart from family.’ If I were to distil my personal response to the show, I would have said I thought the show was about a butch lesbian who thinks her ability to be open with her sexuality at a young age pushed her closeted father into suicide. [...] I would posit that the somehow specific universality of each spectator’s adaptation is one of the positive things about the subjectivity of theatre. They were, and I am, able to glean from Fun Home what each of us needed, and our adaptations each addressed our own individual selfhoods.

Connections

1. What do you think Rice means by “specific universality?”

2. How do you think an individual audience member’s personal experiences impact how they interpret the show? Do you think that’s typical for any show, or is Fun Home somehow more open to audience interpretation?

3. How would you answer the question, “What is Fun Home about?” What elements of your own life inform your interpretation?
THEATREWORKS STUDENT MATINEE: FUN HOME
STUDENT EVALUATION Performance Tasks based on CA State theatre arts standards.

Name __________________________________________ Grade ___________ School _______________________________

Select and complete one of the following activities:

• Rewrite the ending of the play. How would you like to see it end? Why?

• Pick a moment in the play that affected you. Describe the stage elements that created that moment for you (the script, acting, lighting, music, costumes, set design, sound design and/or direction).

• Write a review of the play or an actor.

• Describe something you would change in the production. Describe what benefit that change would create in the production and why.

• Identify and describe how this production might affect the values and behavior of the audience members who have seen it.

• Write about any careers you learned about in attending this production (example: stage hands, set designers, etc.)

ASSESSMENT SURVEY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I learned a lot from this experience</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to do this kind of project again</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will remember what I learned</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The most important thing I learned from this play was...
___________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Besides getting out of class, the best thing about attending this student matinee was...
___________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Learning through theatre is different from my regular class because...
___________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

If I could change something about attending a student matinee, I would...
___________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

I’m going to use what I learned, saw, or experienced by...
___________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
THEATREWORKS STUDENT MATINEE: FUN HOME
TEACHER EVALUATION Performance Tasks based on CA State theatre arts standards.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLANNING</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I received sufficient and timely information from TheatreWorks before</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the performance.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TheatreWorks maintained communication and/or involved administrators at</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was clear to me that production and study guide incorporated curriculum.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| MATINEE WORKSHOPS                                                        |          |       |                |
| Supported other curriculum areas/subjects                               | 1        | 2     | 3              |
| Targeted students’ educational needs                                    | 1        | 2     | 3              |
| Provided a grade-appropriate experience                                 | 1        | 2     | 3              |
| Engaged students’ interest and attention                                | 1        | 2     | 3              |
| I would like to learn how to lead more of these kinds of activities on  | 1        | 2     | 3              |
| my own in the classroom.                                                |          |       | 4              |

| POST-SHOW                                                                |          |       |                |
| Students were engaged in this experience.                               | 1        | 2     | 3              |
| The experience was valuable to my students’ education.                  | 1        | 2     | 3              |
| The “Performance Tasks” were useful in helping my students understand   | 1        | 2     | 3              |
| their experience.                                                       |          |       | 4              |
| I would be interested in bringing more drama-related experiences into   | 1        | 2     | 3              |
| my classroom.                                                           |          |       | 4              |

(Continued on the next page)
THEATREWORKS STUDENT MATINEE: FUN HOME
TEACHER EVALUATION (continued)

For your classroom, please list the strengths of watching a student matinee.
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________

In terms of your teaching, did this particular performance give you any arts integration ideas for your curriculum?
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________

We are very interested in your feedback. What worked for you about this experience?
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________

What did not work for you?
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Additional Comments:
________________________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________

TheatreWorks student matinees tend to fill up quickly. Tickets for the 2018/19 season are on sale now. Please visit theatreworks.org for complete information. Keep us updated with your current contact information, and let us know if you have friends who would like to be added to our mailing lists.