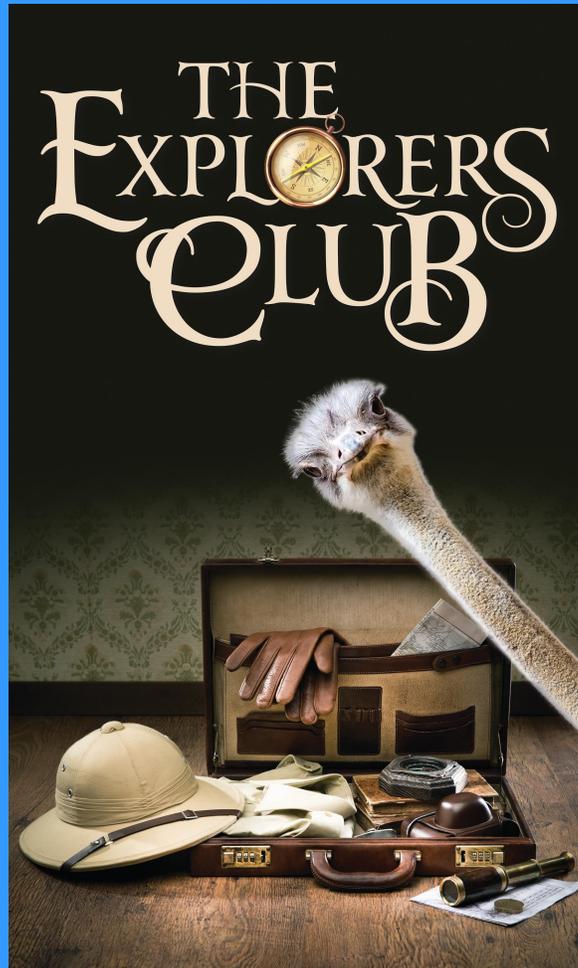




INSIGHTS

DTC's Teacher Resource



The Explorers Club
By Nell Benjamin
Delaware Theatre Company
April 27-May 22, 2016

A Few Words About Comedy...

“Comedy is simply a funny way of being serious.”

—Peter Ustinov

“The secret to humor is surprise.”

—Aristotle

“Humor is reason gone mad.”

—Groucho Marx

“Tension, in physics, is equal to comedic potential (trust me on this, I’m a scientist).”

—Brandon Anderson



INSIGHTS

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(302) 594-1100

www.delawaretheatre.org

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THE EXPLORERS CLUB

Written by

Nell Benjamin

Directed by

Bud Martin

Delaware Theatre Company

Executive Director

Bud Martin

Department of Education and
Community Engagement

Charles Conway, Director

Johanna Schloss, Associate Director

Allie Steele, Assistant Director

Contributing Writers

Johanna Schloss

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Characters

Lucius Fretway—A botanist and a man of science, Lucius is intelligent, thoughtful, and considerate. He has romantic and chivalrous feelings for Phyllida but is too mild-mannered (and well-bred) to let his feelings burst forth in a public declaration of his ardor.

Phyllida Spotte-Hume—An anthropologist who has discovered the NaKong people—the lost tribe of Pahatlabong. Phyllida is an upstanding woman of great poise and intelligence.

Harry Percy—An intrepid explorer, Percy is enthralled with his own adventures and discoveries and seeks to charm Phyllida and impress the other gentlemen.

Luigi—A NaKong tribesman, Luigi has been brought to England and The Explorers Club by Phyllida as a specimen of the people she has studied. Though he speaks his native language, Luigi is an astute learner as he interacts with the British scientists in the group.

Professor Cope—A herpetologist who has a special love for snakes, Cope also considers Professor Walling a dear friend.

Professor Walling—A zoologist who has a special love for Jane, his guinea pig, Walling also considers Professor Cope a dear friend.

Professor Sloane—An archeo-theologist, Sloane is a stuffy and highly conservative member of The Explorers Club who believes that men are superior to women and that his judgement regarding religion, rules, and their enforcement is without parallel.

Sir Bernard Humphries—The private secretary to Queen Victoria, Humphries is a proper gentleman who seeks to perform his duty to the Queen and his country in the most civilized way possible.

Beebe—An explorer from Percy's mission who has been given up for lost (or dead). Because he is a character in the play, we can assume he is not dead.

Countess Glamorgan—A refined lady whose given name is Andromache Spotte-Hume. She is Phyllida's twin sister, but the two have not been on good terms of late.

An Irish Assassin—A well-named character.



Daniel Fredrick plays Lucius in DTC's production of The Explorers Club.



Karen Peakes plays Phyllida and Countess Glamorgan in DTC's production.

Summary

A Note to Readers: To assist educators in preparing their students for seeing our shows, the Department of Education and Community Engagement at DTC prepares and shares detailed summaries of the plots of our productions. These summaries disclose important plot points, including the climax and resolution of each play. Furthermore, our study guides are constructed under the premise that the educator has read our summary, and additional articles herein may reference these same plot points. This notice is intended to provide a “spoiler alert.”

The play opens in the bar of The Explorers Club in London in the year 1879. Lucius, acting as temporary president, welcomes a group of male scientists to their annual meeting of the members of the club. He notes each man’s recent accomplishments in his field of expertise, and the men toast one another, their work, and their bond as scientists. Lucius introduces a female scientist, Phyllida, as the guest speaker of the evening and notes that he is backing her for membership. Phyllida introduces a NaKong tribesman “Luigi” she has brought from her discovery of the Lost City of Pahatlabong. Though she is greeted with applause from the other men after her speech, Professor Sloane makes his position strongly known that he does not support a woman’s admission into the club.



Harry Smith plays explorer Harry Percy at Delaware Theatre Company.

Explorer Harry Percy returns from an expedition. Much to the consternation of Lucius, Percy finds Phyllida attractive, but still he asks her to leave the room so the men can be alone. The men are concerned that their bartender is missing, but still enjoy brandy and cigars and talking about their work. They congratulate Professors Cope and Walling on their upcoming visit to Queen Victoria at the palace. After reentering the room, Phyllida also tells of her upcoming visit with Luigi to the queen. The men go their own ways, and Phyllida and Lucius have a private moment to talk.

The next morning, Lucius’ plants have grown and fill the room with greenery. Lucius tries to persuade some of the scientists to vote for Phyllida’s membership. Sloane still disagrees. Walling, Cope, Phyllida, and Luigi leave for their visit to the palace.

Percy teases Lucius about his awkwardness around women. Suddenly, the other scientists return from their visit. Phyllida is upset at how Luigi acted before the queen. Cope and Walling return, with Walling angry about what happened to his guinea pig. He refuses the friendship of Cope. Sloane heads to the Irish Society to share with them his theory of the Irish people’s ancestry.

Sir Humphries arrives and announces that Queen Victoria would like Phyllida to make a map to Pahatlabong so that the British Empire can make war upon the tribal people. Phyllida refuses. Humphries insists and declares that British guards are outside and ready to force the issue. Sloane returns and acknowledges that his presentation has inflamed the Irish Society, who are now outside ready to battle with the British guards. Humphries backs off his threat, but warns of further action against the members of The Explorers Club.

(continued)

Summary (continued)

As the second act opens, the angry Irish Society and the Queen's Guards are still encamped outside, ready for a fight. Inside the club, Lucius' plants are dying. Phyllida has gone to Pahatlabong to warn the people. Walling and Cope square off about the value of snakes and rodents. Suddenly an Irish assassin bursts into the room, angry about Sloane's recommendation, but mistakenly lunges at Walling. Cope takes the blow and falls. Cope's snake bites the assassin, who dies. The snake then bites Walling. Luigi saves Cope and Walling. The men take the Irish man's body out of the room and, in gratitude for what Luigi has done, agree to hide him from the British Government and Sir Humphries. They dress Luigi as Roger, the missing bartender.

Sir Humphries returns and asks for a drink. Luigi prepares drinks for the group. Humphries tries to recruit Percy to find Pahatlabong and rescue Phyllida, whom he assumes is in danger. Percy and Lucius again butt heads over who is the better man for Phyllida. Countess Glamorgan, a woman who looks just like Phyllida, enters and Lucius kisses her without abandon in front of the group. He then learns that she is Phyllida's twin sister, who reports that Phyllida has built an airship, ruined her garden, and nearly destroyed the family reputation with her actions at the palace. The countess leaves to try to make things right.

Lucius' and Percy's argument erupts again as Lucius criticizes Percy's handling of his colleagues on his expedition. Suddenly, one of those colleagues, the missing explorer Beebe, arrives with a vendetta against Percy. Beebe has brought some angry monks he befriended on the expedition who are now outside engaged in a battle with the British guardsmen and the Irish Society. Lucius attempts to smooth over the conflict inside The Explorers Club by suggesting brandy and cigars for all. As the men smoke their cigars made from one of Lucius' plants, they become calm, forget their troubles, and eventually laugh together. Lucius then creates a plan for giving the angry monks what they want, for stopping the fighting outside, and restoring order. Humphries still insists that Percy go find Phyllida, yet she suddenly returns. Lucius kisses her in front of the group.

Through a game of charades, the members of The Explorers Club convince Sir Humphries that Luigi is gone, that the people of Pahatlabong have left their homes, and that the goal of the British Army—to eliminate the people from their homeland—has been accomplished without the expense and trouble of an all-out war. Humphries is satisfied. Sloane finally agrees that Phyllida deserves membership in The Explorers Club. The play ends as Luigi makes drinks for everyone and they drink to the health of the queen and to the wonders of science.



*Dave Johnson
plays the Na-
Kong tribesman
Luigi in DTC's
production of
The Explorers
Club.*

Teachable Themes and Topics

Women in Science

In the play *The Explorers Club*, Phyllida is an anthropologist seeking membership into the exclusive group of scientists. However, her extensive studies and her discovery of a lost civilization are not seen as enough to qualify her for membership by Professor Sloane, who does not want to admit her because she is a woman. Though the play is a work of fiction and not based on a true story, there is truth in the circumstance that Phyllida faces in how, historically, women often were not afforded the same opportunities as men. Indeed, if you were asked to name famous scientists or explorers, whose names would you first come up with? Albert Einstein? Sir Isaac Newton? Galileo? Columbus? All are men, and all most certainly contributed a great deal to the world in terms of the sciences of physics, astronomy, cartography and anthropology, to name a few. How long might it take you to name a woman and know, in brief, of her contributions to our collective body of scientific knowledge? Here are a few names to help begin that conversation.

Marie Curie (1867-1934): Physics and Chemistry

Maria Skłodowska was the daughter of a Polish math and physics teacher. As a young student, Maria and her sister Bronisława wished to pursue studies in math and sciences in Poland; however, they were not admitted to the universities there because they were women. Maria and her sister bargained that each would work to support the other, one at a time, to pursue their studies in France, where the universities did accept women in their programs. After working as a governess to earn money for her sister's education, Maria moved to France to live with her sister and brother-in-law and began studying mathematics and physics at the University of Paris. There she met Pierre Curie, whom she eventually married. Maria—or Marie, as she was known in France—and Pierre worked extensively in the field of chemistry and conducted research on radioactivity of elements. They discovered two new elements, and Marie's work in radioactivity paved the way for the common use of the X-ray and other therapeutic uses of radiation. Marie and her husband were awarded, with Henri Becquerel, the Nobel Prize in Physics for such work in the field of radiation. After her husband's death, Marie became the chair of the physics department at the University of Paris. She continued her research and teaching and won a second Nobel Prize in Chemistry.



Sally Ride (1951-2015): Physics, Astronautics

Sally Ride was the first American woman in space. She began her career, though, studying and earning a Ph.D. in Physics from Stanford University, and shortly thereafter joined NASA's astronaut training program as the organization sought to include women and minorities as members of their flight crews. In 1983, she became not only the first American woman, but also the youngest American (at age 32) to be an astronaut, flying on the space shuttle Challenger and taking part in a second shuttle mission a year later. When she retired from NASA, she became the director of the California Space Institute and a professor of physics at the University of California, San Diego. She pioneered the idea behind EarthKAM (a project in which middle school students use cameras on the International Space Station to take photos of the Earth) and also founded the Sally Ride Science program to promote STEM education and encourage young women to pursue a career in the world of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

(continued)

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Women in Science (continued)

Margaret Mead (1901-1978): Anthropology

Margaret Mead, the daughter of two academics, was born in Philadelphia and was largely schooled at home by her grandmother. She eventually attended Doylestown High School. Mead found a lifelong interest in anthropology and the study of “forgotten cultures” while attending Barnard College, and she earned her Ph.D. in anthropology from Columbia University. One of her earliest projects was a study of adolescence as it unfolded in American Samoa, where she researched the level of ease or trauma young people experienced during adolescence in that culture. Her findings, published in her book *Coming of Age in Samoa*, indicated that human development is at least as greatly influenced by environmental and cultural factors as by biological or inherent factors. She continued studies of childhood, gender differences, and expectations in different cultures, comparing Western society with more isolated communities in the Pacific islands, and argued that the Western view of many of these people as “primitive” was flawed. Mead also wrote of the problematic view of IQ testing to determine the superiority of one race or ethnicity to another, identifying that socioeconomic, language fluency, and other cultural influences are strongly connected to performance on frequently-used intelligence tests. Mead’s work in anthropology focused on human development across cultures and, though criticized at times for her methods, has been used in the fields of education, psychology, and sociology. Mead’s belief that mankind has the power to make positive change to create a better life for posterity was indicated by her saying, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.”

Jewel Plummer Cobb (1924-present): Microbiology, Zoology

Jewel Plummer Cobb, the daughter of a physician and a school teacher, was born in Chicago and found her calling in scientific research while looking at cells under a microscope in her high school biology class. Though she met with racial discrimination in her early years of schooling, partially through the racial segregation practices in her public schooling in Chicago, and then early in her undergraduate years at the University of Michigan, she persevered and gained admission to NYU’s graduate program, earning both a Master’s and a Ph.D. in cell physiology. She began working for the National Cancer Institute and worked at the Tissue Culture Laboratory at the University of Illinois, researching the effects of chemotherapy on human cells, with a particular interest in skin cancer research. Cobb’s legacy in microbiology continues today as some of the current cancer treatments for melanoma and leukemia are based on her research and findings. She went on to become Dean and Professor of Zoology at Connecticut College and then became the Dean at Douglass College (the women’s division at Rutgers University), working at both schools to improve access, recruitment, and retention for women and minorities in STEM fields. In 1979 Cobb wrote and published “Filters for Women in Science,” an article exposing the difficulties women have in pursuing advanced degrees and work in the sciences, noting that, at the time, there were only 28 women on the National Academy of Sciences’ list of 1208 members. She eventually became the president at California State University at Fullerton. Her work in both the fields of cell physiology and in science education earned her the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Sciences.

Jane Goodall (1934-present): Primatology

Jane Goodall is arguably one of the most famous women in science, known for her extensive study of chimpanzees and their social interactions, and for her lifelong commitment to conservation and animal welfare. Her interest in chimpanzees led her to contact the renowned Louis Leakey, who hired her first as his secretary for his work in Kenya, then supported her in her efforts to obtain a Ph.D. at

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Women in Science (continued)

Cambridge and to work in the field of primatology in Tanzania. Goodall's findings challenged the mainstream science notion at that time that only humans were capable of emotional connections and of using tools. She noted chimps who created and shaped tools for accessing food at a termite mound, and observed frequent social interactions of chimps who hugged, patted, and tickled one another. Her research and publications have changed scientific views in the field of ethology, the study of human and animal social behaviors. Goodall received the Centennial Award from the National Geographic Society and was named a Dame of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II. She founded the Jane Goodall Institute to promote understanding and protection of primates and their habitat and to encourage young people to help animals, to care about other people, and to protect the world we share.

Hedy Lamarr (1914-2000): Technology

Hedy Lamarr is possibly most famous for being a film actress during the Golden Age of MGM. However, her keen intelligence and appetite for learning led her to other pursuits, including technology and engineering. During World War II, her desire to aid the Allied forces in defeating the Nazi war machine led her to develop a system for radio communications that would prevent a signal from being "jammed" and would enable the U.S. military to radio-guide torpedoes towards Nazi targets. She, along with co-inventor George Antheil, developed a method for frequency hopping, or "spread-spectrum" communications. Though the U.S. military did not make use of her invention, her patented method is the backbone for cellular communications and wireless technology used throughout the world today.



Augusta Ada Byron Lovelace (1815-1852): Computer Science

Ada Lovelace was the daughter of the romantic poet Lord Byron. Lovelace's mother sought to steer her daughter away from the literary arts and the path of her tempestuous father by having the girl tutored almost exclusively in mathematics. When Ada was only a teenager, she met Charles Babbage, who designed a mechanical calculator. Through their mutual interest in machinery and the designs for such, they became friends, and he suggested she write a scholarly article about his idea for an "analytical engine." Ada not only described what Babbage's creation might do if it were built, but went further, suggesting the potential of developing a systematic, logic-based language which could assist a machine to function, and predicting how these machines—what we now call computers—could do things ranging from playing music to creating graphics. Her written instructions from the 1840s went virtually unnoticed until a century later, when they were republished and rediscovered by mathematicians of the mid-20th century, who used them to begin writing the programs that launched the computer age. Lovelace's work paved the way for fellow female computer scientists, including **Jean Jennings Bartik** and **Admiral Grace Hopper**, who were pioneers in the field of modern-day computer programming beginning in the 1940s, working on ENIAC (the first large-scale computer) and creating software (Hopper created the language COBOL) that made the use of computers accessible for business and industry.



Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Civil Interactions

When Phyllida returns from Pahatlabong, she introduces the native Nakong man she has dubbed “Luigi” to members of The Explorers Club, who welcome the stranger with open arms to their all-male circle. Phyllida has learned some of Luigi’s language and has taught him some English phrases and customs. Some of the brightest comic moments of the play surround Luigi’s interactions with the scientists and with the unseen Queen Victoria. Yet one of the chief conflicts erupts as England chooses to declare war on Pahatlabong and Phyllida works to save Luigi and the other Nakong people. Other plot threads add to the culture clash as a group of Irish citizens and a group of Tibetan monks arrive to protest the way they have been treated by the members of The Explorers Club.

The lighthearted silliness of the characters masks a biting wit that takes on some weighty issues that existed in the Victorian Age. Playwright Nell Benjamin, in the spirit of a true satire, skewers the dark side of the imperialism and colonialism that were part of British history at the time. In several moments of the play, which takes place in 1879, the characters—well-to-do, educated Englishmen—refer to Luigi as “a savage.” Sir Humphries contrasts Luigi and the Nakong to the “civilized” world of England and notes that the British Army plans to “level Pahatlabong.” In another example, explorer Harry Percy, who has returned from an expedition to the mountains of Tibet, is found to have desecrated a sacred mountain by his crude behavior, infuriating the local people. In yet another instance, Professor Harry Sloane reignites the animosity between the Irish and the English, with religion again being at the core of the unrest. In these and other examples from the play, Benjamin offers a slice of irony, showing that this “civilized” group of gentlemen and their “civilized” country behave uncivilly towards others, a practice that was common in the New Imperialism of the Victorian Age.

After losing the American colonies during the Revolutionary War, a new sentiment towards growing the British Empire came into being during the age of Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837 to 1901. At first the growth of the empire was slow, but a more rapid expansion began around 1870 as Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli encouraged imperialistic ventures. By the end of the 19th century, over one-fifth of the countries of the world were linked in some way—whether as official British colonies and territories or as “protectorates”—to Great Britain. This expansion and imperialism at times did not come through peaceful negotiations between countries and people, but often through military action, as is seen in the Ashanti wars, the forced relocation of Australian aboriginal peoples, and the Indian Rebellion of 1857.



Britain’s Queen Victoria, who reigned from 1837-1901.

Though many British citizens decried the manner in which their country gained a foothold on territories throughout the world, others defended imperialism and even the violence that came with it, at times blaming indigenous people for escalating a conflict, and claiming that had those people been civilized, war would not have been necessary. One such claim came from British anthropologist Edward Tyler, who in 1871 wrote, “Savage moral standards are real enough, but they are far looser and weaker than ours. . . . But that any known savage tribe would not be improved by judicious civilization, is a proposition which no moralist would dare to make; while the general tenour of the evidence goes far to justify the view that on the whole the civilized man is not only wiser and more capable than the savage, but also better and happier. . . .”

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Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Civil Interactions (continued)

Beyond expanding around the globe, Great Britain sought to solidify its position as the head of one of its closest neighbors—Ireland. For hundreds of years, English rulers attempted to colonize Ireland. Eventually, British rule won out. Irish Catholics, persecuted by a Protestant governing body and culture, experienced systematic discrimination as they were stripped of many of their rights. In 1800, the Act of Union law was passed, officially stating that Ireland was under British rule. By 1870, though, in the heart of the Victorian Era, the cry for “Home Rule” from the Irish led to political strife between the two countries and bitter skirmishes among the people.

The Explorers Club takes on some of these conflicts that erupted under the New Imperialism of this era, referencing some of the commonly voiced beliefs of scientists, philosophers, writers, and political leaders of the age. But it is important to note that Britain was not alone in its imperialist tendencies. The French, Dutch, Germans, Spanish, and Americans, too, sought to expand their reach, both for economic purposes (through acquiring natural resources, goods, or labor or through establishing a favorable trade route) and, philosophically speaking, promoting the ways of Western societies. Mistreatment of the indigenous communities was common, and commonly defended. Frenchman Jules Ferry, Prime Minister of France in the late 1800s, told his Chamber that it is “the duty [of superior races] to civilize the inferior races” when promoting his plan for colonization of Tunisia, the Congo, and Indochina.



The marks of what made one country civilized in comparison to another were many and, indeed, arbitrary to the men and women making the distinction. Often the dominating country sought to impart their language, their religious beliefs, their manner of dress, and other elements of their culture on the native peoples, and often with the purpose not of adding to the natives’ culture, but instead replacing the culture. And, as Sir Humphries lightly suggests in the play, it was common practice to use destructive means to force the issue. These violent methods were not without their detractors. In real life, Bartolome de las Casas, a Dominican missionary, witnessed the horrific treatment of the natives of the island of Hispaniola by the Spanish, and eventually wrote to the pope, asking him to condemn all acts of conquest as a means of promoting religious conversion. More recently, the history books are being rewritten to acknowledge that the Native Americans were not “savages” in need of Western government, philosophy, and culture, but groups of people with their own valuable systems, beliefs, and ways of life who suffered when European soldiers and settlers invaded their land to claim it as their own.

History teaches her lessons in an ongoing manner, and each succeeding generation hopes to avoid making the mistakes that came before. At times, though, these lessons in history seem remote or appear dry and unrelated to our contemporary world. Yet that is what makes theatre a powerful tool: in an accessible way, we can be reminded of what once was, what we have since learned, and what we can strive to become. *The Explorers Club* is a comedy, the situations exaggerated for humor, and the ending is happy for all involved. The comedy allows us to laugh at these characters—and at our collective human foibles and failures—while underscoring, again, that our laughter comes only as a result of what we have learned through the ages: the lesson of being “civil”—respectful—toward one another.

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Scientific Organizations

The Explorers Club is a fictional organization of elite male scientists and explorers. Within the play, they speak of a competitive grudge against another scientific organization, the National Geographic Society. The National Geographic Society is a real organization founded in 1888 as “a society for the increase and diffusion of geographic knowledge.” In 1890 the organization sponsored an expedition to Canada and Alaska to map the Mount St. Elias region, during which Mount Logan, Canada’s highest peak, was discovered. In the 1920s, the group sponsored another legendary expedition, this one uncovering the lost city of Machu Picchu in the Andes mountains. National Geographic Society is based in Washington, D.C. and is esteemed as an organization dedicated to science, exploration, and education.

Another American scientific society that existed well before the National Geographic Society was Philadelphia’s own American Philosophical Society, founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1743. The group met to further the inquiry into nature, science, and, in Franklin’s words, “all philosophical Experiments that let Light into the Nature of Things, tend to increase the Power of Man over Matter, and multiply the Conveniencies or Pleasures of Life.” George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Rush were some of the early members of the group. Perhaps Franklin’s own experiments and inventions were the most renowned, but there were many other scientific ideas studied and published by the group, including astronomer David Rittenhouse’s telescopic study of the transit of Venus, which, when published, attracted international attention. The American Philosophical Society welcomed a woman to their ranks in 1789—the Russian Princess Dashkova, who was the head of the Imperial (Russian) Academy of Sciences. It was another 80 years before another woman would be invited to join the American Philosophical Society.

England has its own esteemed scientific organizations. Perhaps the most lauded is the Royal Society, which was founded in 1660. The Royal Society is the oldest continuous scientific association in the world, formed by a group of men following a lecture by Sir Christopher Wren. The Royal Society began publishing works of science and mathematics shortly after its founding, including Sir Isaac Newton’s treatise on gravity, a publication about the first successful use of inoculation (vaccination) against disease in England, and an article detailing Benjamin Franklin’s kite experiments with electricity. The Royal Society also sponsored expeditions and supported Captain James Cook’s exploration of Tahiti, among others. Some of the Fellows of the Royal Society include Newton, Charles Darwin, and Albert Einstein. The organization did not accept women, though, until 1945, when Kathleen Lonsdale and Marjory Stephenson were admitted as Fellows.

Some of the imagined circumstances of Phyllida Spot-Hume’s attempt to become the first female member of The Explorers Club are not far off the mark of the real situation of women scientists who attempted to gain membership in British scientific organizations in the latter part of the Victorian Era. Natural scientist Marian Farquharson, though admitted to the Royal Microscopical Society, was prohibited from attending meetings or voting, and was turned down for membership by The Royal Society based not on their written charter, but on their centuries-old tradition of the exclusion of women. Hertha Ayrton, a mathematician, engineer, and inventor, was recognized for her research into electricity and for the many scientific works she published, and was nominated in 1902 by Royal Society Fellow John Perry for membership. Ayrton was turned down on the basis of her

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Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Scientific Organizations (continued)

being a married woman, with the Society saying, “We are of the opinion that married women are not eligible as Fellows of the Royal Society. Whether the Charters admit of the election of unmarried women appears to us to be very doubtful.” Ayrton did receive her due several years later, being the first woman to present a paper to the Royal Society (“The Origin and Growth of Ripple Marks”) and, in 1906, was awarded their prestigious Hughes Medal.



Hertha Ayrton, who was denied membership to London's Royal Society for scientists on the basis of her being a married woman.

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

A Fantastic Farce

The Explorers Club is an example of a farce, which is a type of comedy that finds humor in extreme situations. In writing *The Explorers Club*, playwright Nell Benjamin creates a bustling romp of humor that includes broadly-drawn characters, the “fish-out-of-water” classic comic device, witty dialogue, complications that follow one another and become entangled (often pushing the envelope of believability), and opportunities for actors to “show off” with hilarious comic bits.

Many films and TV shows could also be categorized as farces. The Marx Brothers’ movies, for example, all involve that frantic comic pace, with the audience loving the way each actor created a humorous character or performed one of their famous comic bits. More recently, a movie like *Bridesmaids* offers farcical humor as vastly different characters interact and the conflicts build and twist together. In the world of television, series such as *I Love Lucy*, *Frasier*, and *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* have farcical elements that keep the audience laughing as the characters do one zany thing after another. And those actors in farces are challenged with “bringing the funny”; that is, wringing as much humor out of the script and the characters’ situations as possible. They may take on silly character voices, employ a physical quirk of a character, or just heighten the tension of a situation through being more emotionally expressive than perhaps would be natural.



Character in Monty Python’s Flying Circus demonstrates a “silly walk,” a comic bit.

Directors are charged with many tasks, including staging a show—planning where, when, and often how a character moves from one part of the stage to another. The director of a farce must think about creating funny visual effects, often setting up stage pictures that will elicit a laugh just from appearance. Bud Martin, the director of DTC’s production of *The Explorers Club*, sets up moments that, purely from a visual standpoint, spur laughter from the audience, such as when he places the NaKong tribesman Luigi smack dab in the middle of what would be a private, romantic moment for Lucius and Phyllida. The physical nature of some of the comedy in farce, too, demands that directors find the funniest (albeit at times the roughest-looking!) way for characters to interact, whether sweeping someone off her feet or staging an attack on a scientist by a venomous cobra. In theatre, the word “lazzi” refers to a comic action or sight gag that actors during Italian Renaissance commedia dell’arte used. Lazzi were comic bits (such as a butler carrying a tall stack of dishes that would precariously sway, creating tension and laughter) that actors perfected and could recreate or insert in different scenarios. Within *The Explorers Club*, playwright Benjamin set up an opportunity for such humor in an episode of wild bartending. Director Martin choreographed the action, and the actors rehearsed the bit again and again, knowing that when the lazzi of flying drinks would occur during the show, the audience would react with glee. All of these comic moments are carefully planned by the director, and rehearsed again and again so they run smoothly and safely while looking to be spontaneous or unpremeditated—all for pushing the level of humor.

Theatre technicians, too, keep the concept of farce in mind when they design and build sets, costumes, and props. Set designers, for example, offer a “playground” for the actors in terms of choosing interesting furniture pieces on which actors can explore and play and creating in general a

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Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

A Fantastic Farce (continued)

look that invites the audience to have fun. Scenic artists and carpenters also consider the very physical side of a farce. If actors are going to jump on a couch as part of a comic bit, that couch might have to be reinforced to withstand that type of usage. Costume and prop designers design and choose pieces that lend themselves to humor, often selecting unusual items or accessories to signal to the audience that laughter is appropriate.

Witty dialogue, extreme situations, physical humor, and broad characters contribute to the hilarity of *The Explorers Club*. The whole creative team—playwright, director, actors, designers, and technicians—work together as an ensemble to bring out—and wring out—every ounce of humor possible. In watching this contemporary play, audiences are treated to some of the best traditions of comedy in the world of theatre.



Playwright Nell Benjamin (left, at table), with director Bud Martin (center) and costume designer Wade Laboissonniere in a production meeting for The Explorers Club.

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Try Speaking Nakong!

The Lost City of Pahatlabong is a fictional place, and the NaKong people who live there are also creations from the imagination of playwright Nell Benjamin. In writing her play, Benjamin built in opportunities for the NaKong tribesman Luigi and the British scientist Phyllida to communicate, with each having learned some of the other's language. Rather than create gibberish, though, Benjamin actually created a NaKong language, including nouns, verbs, adjectives, and the rules of grammar and verb conjugation for the language. As author J. R. R. Tolkien did when creating the Elvish language used in *Lord of the Rings*, Benjamin considered the world of the speakers of the language, and constructed vocabulary that would befit the people of that world. Here are a few examples of NaKong language from Benjamin's guide.

Eekwa	=	Monkey
Seefka	=	Snake
Naarjit	=	Hut, home
Hatla	=	Peace
Naarglug	=	Canoe
G'nam	=	Food (literally "toad jerky")
Jat	=	Bad
Mwah	=	Good
Huei	=	Funny
Mah	=	I disguise myself as someone else in order to deceive my enemies.

Below, some common verbs and the conjugations (present tense) for such:

Infinitive: To Be

Basan (I am)	Baseima (We are)
Bas (You are)	Baseila (You are—plural)
Bei (He/she/it is)	Basei (They are)

Infinitive: To See

Leilo (I look, see)	Leim (We see)
Leilas (You see)	Lelas (You see—plural)
Lei (He/she/it sees)	Lem (They see)

Questions for Classroom Discussion

Knowledge and Comprehension

1. What makes Lucius believe Phyllida is a good candidate for membership in The Explorers Club? What do the other members think about her?
2. What has Harry Percy claimed to have accomplished?
3. Why does Sir Humphries want a map from Phyllida? What has Luigi done to anger the British monarchy?
4. What is special about the plant that Lucius has identified and brought to the club?
5. How do Lucius and Phyllida get themselves, and Luigi, out of trouble?

Application and Analysis

1. Compare and contrast Percy and Lucius. What do they have in common? What sets them apart from each other?
2. Why would Phyllida want membership in the group?
3. Which character is most “civilized”? What makes him or her so?

Synthesis and Evaluation

1. In your opinion, who is the most likeable character in the play? Why do you say so?
2. Some might argue that the ethnic references in the play could offend people. Would you agree or disagree? Explain your thoughts.
3. Which elements of the play did you find funny? What makes something funny?

Classroom Activities

1. Choose one of the women scientists from the study guide, or choose one from your own research. Examine this scientist's contributions to the body of knowledge we now have in our world. What obstacles, if any, did this woman face in pursuing her education or career? How has her work been useful to the scientific world or to society in general? Create a presentation to share with your class.
2. Research the topic of gender or ethnic/racial discrimination in education or the workplace as it relates to the United States. What types of discrimination have been common in U.S. history with regard to education or the job market? Choosing one aspect, examine the historical situation more closely. When and how was this discrimination part of society's practice? What steps were taken, and by whom, to rectify the situation? What types of laws or protections are in place now, if any, to make access or experience more fair? Share your findings with your class.
3. There are still discoveries waiting to be made in the world in the fields of biology, medicine, archaeology, anthropology, and other sciences. What problem or question do you have for which you'd like to have an answer? If you could be part of a team to make a discovery or to unlock a mystery, what would that discovery or mystery be? Research the current players and practices in that field, and if possible, contact the person or organization by email, telephone, or social media to learn more about the ongoing work. Is there anything you could do right now to be a part of this person's or organization's work? What steps might you take towards learning more about the problem or question at hand and making that discovery/finding a solution? Create a graphic organizer or other visual representation of a process you could follow to make a difference in the scientific world and, possibly, in society at large. After sharing your work with your class, discuss the possibility and/or probability of your exploring this field of study. What obstacles might you face? What obstacles did other scientists and explorers face on their journey? What can be said about the road to achievement in science or in any field? What lessons might be drawn?
4. The "fish out of water" comic device is one in which a character is placed in an unlikely or unfamiliar situation. Luigi can be called a "fish out of water." Write a scene in which you imagine Luigi attending another event in Phyllida's future life. Which characters from *The Explorers Club* would you incorporate into your scene? What conflict might erupt? Would Luigi be the cause, the solution, or both? How might you work in humor similar to that in the original play? After writing your scene, ask your classmates to do a dramatic reading or rehearse and perform the scene for the class.
5. Gather in groups and select one member of each group to be the director, while the other group members serve as actors. Each group should choose a well-known story (fairy tales or fables are excellent options). As a group, identify four or five key moments in the story that the actors can physically illustrate in a posed picture (also known as a tableau) that brings out the comic potential of the scene. The director in each group should carefully pose the actors so that the audience can see all of the important expressions. Share your story-tableaux with one another, noting the role of creating interesting visual pictures in bringing out the humor in a piece.

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Page 13—Nell Benjamin, Bud Martin, Wade Laboissonniere. Photo by Breck Willis of Delaware Theatre Company.

Why Go to the Theatre?

State and National Education Standards Addressed Through Taking Your Students to a Live Theatre Production

When your students view live theatre, they are taking part in a learning experience that engages their minds on many levels. From simple recall and comprehension of the plot of a play or musical to analysis and evaluation of the production elements of a show, students receive and interpret messages communicated through words, movement, music, and other artistic devices. Beyond “I liked it; it was good,” students learn to communicate about the content and performance of an artistic piece and to reflect on their own and others’ emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual points-of-view and responses. And the immediacy of live theatre--the shared moments between actors and audience members in the here-and-now--raises students’ awareness of the power and scope of human connection.

The following educational standards are addressed in a visit to a performance at Delaware Theatre Company along with a pre-show DTC classroom presentation and post-show talk-back session at the theatre. *(Additional standards addressed through the use of the study guide or through further classroom study are not included here.)*

Common Core English Language Arts Standards:

Reading: 9-10 and 11-12, Strands 3, 4, 6

Language: 9-10 and 11-12, Strands 3, 4, and 5

National Standards in Theatre Education (AATE/ETA):

Grades 5-8: CS 6a, 6c, 6d; 7a, 7b, 7c; 8a, 8c; 8d

Grades 9-12: CS 6a, b; Adv. 6b; 7a, 7b, 7c, 7d; Adv. 7e, 7f; 8a, 8c, 8d

Delaware Standards for English Language Arts (DOE):

Standard 2: 2.2a, 2.4b1, 2.5b, 2.5g, 2.6a

Standard 3: 3.1b, 3.3b1, 3.3b2

Standard 4: 4.1a, 4.1b, 4.1c, 4.2f, 4.3a, 4.4b

Delaware Standards for Visual and Performing Arts—Theatre (DOE):

Standard 6: 6.4, 6.5

Standard 7: 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, 7.4, 7.5, 7.6

Standard 8: 8.3, 8.4

In addition to the standards above, the production of *The Explorers Club* may support classroom lessons on the following:

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies:

Theme 1—Culture

Theme 2—Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 5—Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6—Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 9—Global Connections

*Compiled by Johanna Schloss, Associate Director of Education &
Community Engagement, Delaware Theatre Company, 2016*