

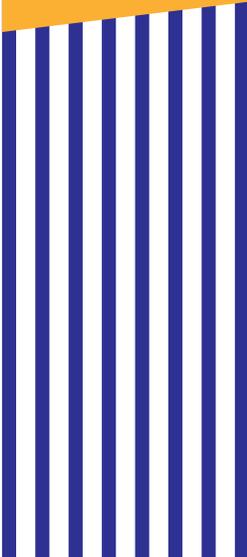
# TEENS BEHIND THE SCENES

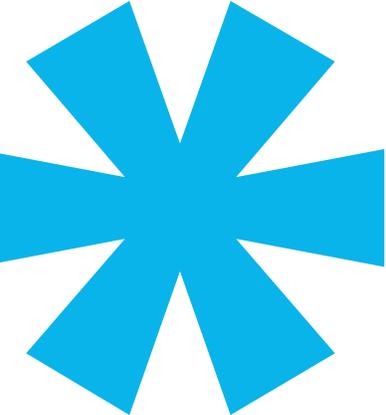
# Prompt Book

2025-26



THE  
NATIONAL THEATRE  
FOUNDATION





## Teens Behind the Scenes Promptbook

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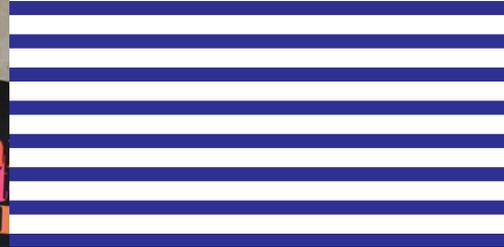


For almost 200 years, The National Theatre has occupied a prominent position on Pennsylvania Avenue—“America’s Main Street”—and played a central role in the cultural and civic life of Washington, DC. Located a stone’s throw from the White House and having the Freedom Plaza as its “front yard,” The National Theatre is a historic, cultural presence in our Nation’s Capital and the oldest continuously operating enterprise on Pennsylvania Avenue. The non-profit National Theatre Foundation oversees the historic theatre and serves the DC community through free outreach programs, *Saturday Morning Live!*, *Community Stage Connections*, and *Teens Behind the Scenes*. These programs provide the greater Washington area with access to high quality performing arts experiences while promoting and employing local and regional artists.

This guide was created for the *Teens Behind the Scenes* program. *Teens Behind the Scenes* is made possible thanks to the generosity of the Jacqueline Badger Mars Next Generation Fund at The National Theatre. Established by Jacqueline Badger Mars in 2022, the fund provides leadership support for The National Theatre Foundation’s signature community programs and seeks to inspire future theatre artists and appreciators onstage, behind the scenes, and in the audience.

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# WELCOME TO TBTS!

## A Dramaturgy Roundtable

Welcome to Teens Behind the Scenes (TBTS)! Since 2017, TBTS has been creating access to touring productions at The National Theatre for students in the Washington, DC area and creating digital resources about careers in performing arts and the history of The National. This year, we're welcoming more theatre lovers and educators than ever before.

We're also trying something new: a unified curriculum we're calling our "Promptbook." In theatre, the promptbook is a copy of a play text marked up with all the necessary directions to bring it to life onstage. While you won't be taking to The National's stage yourself (at least, not yet), we hope this document will *prompt* you to engage with major topics and trends in professional theatre and spark your critical thinking skills ahead of your visit.

In this document, you'll find articles and exercises developed by Lindsey R. Barr and Leayne C. Dempsey, our longtime TBTS Dramaturgs. Throughout, Lindsey and Leayne will invite you to situate what you see at The National in the larger context of American theatre while flexing your intellectual and creative muscles. We hope it will not only enrich your experience but keep you engaged with theatre in its many forms.

To set the scene, I met up with Lindsey and Leayne to talk about what we do as dramaturgs, what shows have moved us, and how our own experiences in high school theatre made us who we are today. Read on to learn more, or consult the table of contents to jump to the next topic.

– Jared Strange, Director of Education and Community Programs

### In your own words, what does a dramaturg do?



**LINDSEY** Dramaturgs think critically about the text of a piece, whether that's alongside a new playwright trying to figure out what the play wants to be or working in a production by providing historical context or feedback to the director. They are interested in moving the play or production process toward what it wants to be. I also like to say, and I first heard this from my mentor, Lauren Halvorsen, that the dramaturg is the play's first audience member. They're thinking about what the audience's reception will be and helping move the show toward making sense to them.



**LEAYNE** When it comes to working with playwrights, I always say that it's about getting the world that's inside the playwright's head to manifest itself outwards. We come to the play with a magnifying glance, clarifying each character's journey. It's not just the greater storyline that matters, but the smaller pieces, too. And then at The National, we get to do these talkbacks and point out some of the incredible art that the audience got to experience.



**JARED** I think a dramaturg can be thought of as The Contextualizer. They ask what is the context that created this play? Who is the writer? What was going on in their world? What is the world *they* have created? What do the designers, actors and directors *need* to know? What choices is the writer and later the director making and how is that working (or not working) in the context of what came before? And then, of course, in what context is the play being performed?

### What's your favorite high school theatre memory?

**LEAYNE** At one point, I had to choose between doing color guard and theatre. One role I played that jumped out to me was Bette from the musical *Oliver*. It was really, really fun. Another show that jumped out at me happened when I was captain of the color guard during senior year. I couldn't do the show, but I went to see it—and it was *Gypsy*, y'all. *Gypsy* kind of changed it for me.

Also, I just want to put this plug in: If you are a budding dramaturg, seeing high school theatre is the easiest way to get knowledge of shows under your belt!

**LINDSEY** I was also a dual theatre/marching band person, and I also had to choose between music and theatre! One of my favorite memories was in senior year, when we did *Little Shop of Horrors*. It was the first musical I actually performed in. Being in the ensemble for a show like that gave me a deep appreciation for all the pieces that go into making theatre. It was especially important to me to get out of my comfort zone and affirm that I wanted to be involved in theatre in some way.

**JARED** I went to a really small school and they very kindly let us create our own work. Some of my early playwriting experience was writing a show called "You're Watching Love on ESPN." It was about a guy on a date and some ESPN commentators commenting on his incredible lack of form.



Leayne C. Dempsey (far left, in purple) in conversation with cast and crew from *SIX* (2024)





Lindsey R. Barr in conversation with *Teens Behind the Scenes* participants following a performance of *Pretty Woman: The Musical* (2023).

## What's a show you saw recently that left an impression on you?

**LINDSEY** Last winter, one of my friends in Baltimore put up a show they wrote called *I Will Eat You Alive*, about the experience of plus-size women going through the world. The whole concept of the show is that it's a dinner party. You come into the space and you sit at a long banquet table, where you're invited to eat common diet food. It was only 45 minutes, but it left a really big impact on me. I know the writer, so it felt very vulnerable for them to share their life, but I was also moved by how intimate it was.

**LEAYNE** When I think about my work at The National, the shows that really jump out to me are anything that addressed my own culture, like African-American history and the Middle Passage. *The Wiz* was such a fun experience for a number of reasons, one of which is the production's use of Afrofuturism. The art brought that to me in a personal way. More recently, I've also come to love devised theatre. I love the movement work that's

happening over in London and affecting what we do here. *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, for example, was amazing.

**JARED** Leayne, you mentioned *Gypsy*, and I got to see the recent Broadway production featuring Audra McDonald. This was the first time the legendary role of Mama Rose was played, at this level, by a Black woman. It raised interesting questions about how the show changes when you cast a Black actor in this role. To me, it added an exciting extra layer.

## What do you want students to pay attention to when they're seeing a show?

**LEAYNE** There's a really wonderful text called *The Empty Space*, written by Peter Brook, in which he talks about "the acid test." When a show ends and everything else is burned away, what's left in your mind? Why is *that* the thing that left an impression on your heart?

Whatever that is, being able to ask what is sticking with you and investigating why is really useful.

**LINDSEY** I'm just going to say what Leayne said, in a perhaps slightly different way, because it was brilliant. I always tell students to start with what they're interested in. Because regardless of what the answer is, that's always the right answer. And then I always encourage them to say *why* they found that interesting. There are so many ways to get into a play or a musical or a devised piece.

**JARED** I push students to be very clear about what they saw and to exercise a really rich vocabulary to describe it. I would encourage students coming to *Teens Behind the Scenes* to literally start with putting together the pieces they see in front of them. When you do that at a detailed level, that's only going to strengthen your ability to appreciate the show.

## What is something you want students to know about professional theatre and how it works?

**LINDSEY** To the people who say to themselves, "I'm not an actor, so there's not a place for me, or I'm not a designer, so there's not a place place for me"—I just want them to know that there are so many ways to be involved in shows beyond just being on stage or backstage. There's an expansive network of really skilled people who put up every single production. There's space for you!

**LEAYNE** I would add that theatre is worldwide. When we start to engage theatre, it's local, it's something that is connected to where we live. Being in the US, we also have these hotspots for theatre, DC being one of them. But I would also encourage everyone to explore theatre hotspots around the world. We've heard of London, but many folks aren't familiar with Mexico City's theatre scene in the same way. There's just so much theatre to engage with.

**JARED** One thing I really wish we could show students is how productions come to The National, get unpacked, get put on stage, and then packed up again. Touring shows are an incredible feat of logistics. If you have an opportunity to see or be part of that process later on, it's wonderful to watch.

## What advice would you give to students looking to grow as artists and pursue a career in the performing arts?

**LEAYNE** When you're trying to take that next step, maybe by going to college to study theatre, allow yourself to see all the options. There is no one way to get into the theatre industry, there is no perfect degree, and there is no perfect program. Think about what a program can provide you that will help you grow. I always tell high school students to think about all the things they've cultivated throughout their education. For example, Lindsey and I both talked about marching band: don't leave all that cool stuff just to pursue a degree in theatre! Take those things with you and find the program that's gonna embrace all that you have.

**LINDSEY** I would say maintain curiosity and be generous. When students show up in my dramaturgy class, I say, "everything you think you know about reading a play, forget it. We're starting from ground zero." So be curious and be willing to learn. And then also be a generous colleague. I don't just mean be nice: give people the benefit of the doubt, ask people what they need, and be understanding. Yes, theatre is great, but we're also human beings, so give people grace to do what they need to do and to make mistakes.

**JARED** Seconding those points. Every experience you have, whether you go into a career in theatre or not, can accumulate into expertise, into things to draw from creatively, into ways to be smarter, more generous, and more engaged. Use it all! Also, generosity goes a long way. That and being professional are always going to take you far.

# A Brief History of THE NATIONAL THEATRE

By Jared Strange

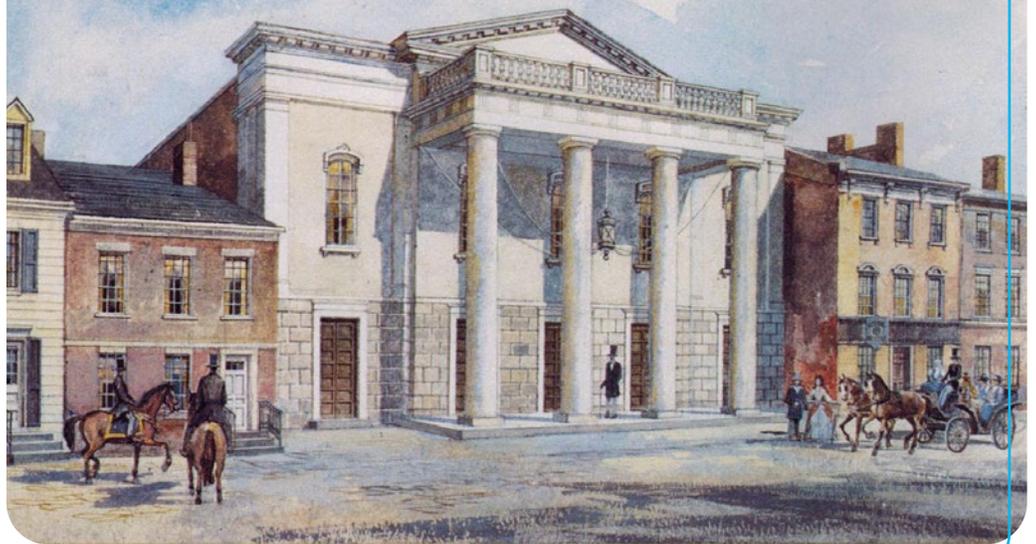
The National Theatre opened in 1835 with a clear purpose: to put the nation's capital on the map as a city of culture, equal to other capitals around the world. Since then, it has risen above numerous challenges to play a pivotal role in the cultural and civic life of Washington, DC.

From the beginning, The National has drawn top talent and guests. Leading lights of the American theatre, including Edwin Forrest, Junius Brutus Booth, and Charlotte Cushman were fixtures onstage. President Andrew Jackson, meanwhile, attended the theatre's first performance, and the venue later hosted President James K. Polk's inaugural ball.

Unfortunately, The National's early years were also marked by tumult. In 1845, the theatre had its first tussle with its 19th century nemesis: fire. While the fire reduced the building to ashes, it also began a cycle of renewal that would mark The National's first fifty years. In 1850, it reopened triumphantly under new management with two sold-out concerts by the legendary Swedish songstress Jenny Lind—and then ran afoul of fire in 1857.

The site lay dormant for another five years before reopening in 1862 as the "New National Theatre," just three years before the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, who was shot in 1865 at Ford's

Artist Joseph Bailey's recreation of the original National Theatre building when it first opened in 1835.



Theatre a few blocks away. Lincoln was a frequent visitor to The National; his assassin, John Wilkes Booth, was a member of the Booth acting dynasty who had played The National before. Lincoln's son Tad was at The National that night, watching a production of *Aladdin*.

As the country recovered from the Civil War, The National began to enjoy much bigger booms than busts. Two more fires followed in 1873 and 1885, but the theatre reopened in less than a year each time. An early proto-musical *The Black Crook* (1868), classics such as Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *HMS Pinafore* (1879), and several performances from acclaimed French actress Sarah Bernhardt in 1881 ensured it remained a destination for great theatre.

By the turn of the twentieth century, The National found itself on stable footing. A growing White middle-class increased traffic at the theatre, welcoming famous revues such as the *Ziegfeld Follies* and performances by the Metropolitan Opera. Following infrastructural renovations in 1922, the building remained largely unchanged for the following sixty years.

During this time, The National began to build a reputation as a stop for producers looking to test new material ahead of a potential bow on Broadway. In 1927, The National hosted the world premiere engagement of the musical *Show Boat*. After that the flood gates opened, letting in future classics such as

*West Side Story* (1957) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) before their Broadway runs. That trend has continued well into the 21st century, taking in such hits as *Mean Girls* (2017), *Beetlejuice* (2018), and a revised version of *The Wiz* (2023). Major figures, including President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and many of his successors, meanwhile, continued to be high-profile visitors.

By the time it turned 100 years old, The National found itself in the midst of the defining political battle of the twentieth century: the fight for desegregation. Until the 1950s, The National was a largely segregated venue. In the 1930s, Black activists pressured management to allow Black patrons to attend *The Green Pastures* (1933) and the iconic opera *Porgy and Bess* (1936) starring Todd Duncan en masse. They later collaborated with White allies to secretly purchase tickets to productions and then demand a refund when denied entry. By 1947, pressure from leading actors such as Helen Hayes prompted the Actors Equity Association to ban members of its union from performing at The National. Management still refused to integrate and eventually converted the theatre into a cinema in 1948.

Thankfully, The National reopened, under new management, as an integrated performing arts venue in 1952. While the fight for desegregation continued nationwide, subsequent decades saw more diversity in The National's offerings. American leaders who played a pivotal role in the changing landscape, meanwhile, were frequent visitors. President John F. Kennedy was a fixture at The National, while his successor Lyndon B. Johnson received very special treatment when he was pulled onstage for the curtain call following a performance of the all-Black version of *Hello, Dolly!* featuring Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway.

In the 1970s, The National once again faced closure. The opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts represented stiff competition for bookings, while the creation of the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, tasked with drastically transforming the area along the country's most famous street, meant The National could find itself on the chopping block. These twin challenges were met by The National Theatre Corporation (now The National Theatre Foundation), which was formed as a non-profit in 1974 to safeguard the historic site.



The front page of the program for *The Black Crook*, considered by some to be the first American musical. *The Black Crook* was scandalous for its time, though that scandal did more to sell tickets than anything else. This object is one of many prizes held in The National Theatre Archive.

Pearly Bailey (center in white) with President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson (left) following a matinee of *Hello, Dolly!* in 1967.



Robert Knudsen

Thanks to the Corporation's tireless advocacy and support from the likes of Broadway star Carol Channing, The National Theatre emerged from a period of uncertainty with plans for a massive renovation that would update the auditorium's stage and interior and create a five-story backstage building. It reopened as part of the newly expanded Pennsylvania Avenue with a performance of the musical *42nd Street* and President Ronald Reagan in attendance.

For the past forty years, The National has continued to be a destination for pre-Broadway engagements and national tours. The Foundation, meanwhile, operates several community engagement programs—including *Teens Behind the Scenes*, of course—and The National Theatre Archive, which houses its extensive array of production records and artifacts. Like every theatre in the country, The National was forced to close its doors in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thankfully, it reopened in November 2021 and has gone on to host many blockbuster offerings thanks to the work of commercial managers the Nederlander Organization.

## Further Reading

Want to dive deeper into the history of The National Theatre? Check out our series of websites charting the major events and stars that have made The National what it is. Start with *A Brief History of The National Theatre*, then take a look at major pre-Broadway engagements with *Big Before Broadway* and *West Side Stories*. Then, learn more about four icons in *The National's Leading Ladies* and the many ways in which politics have shaped our stage in *National Theatre, National Politics*.





# ACTIVITIES

## Adding to the Timeline

Consult the timeline page on *A Brief History of The National Theatre*. Notice how major milestones in The National's history are placed alongside significant moments in American history. Notice that it stops in 2019. For this activity, write out at least two new entries for this timeline.



In one entry, list a major historical event that has transpired since 2019. Briefly describe it and comment on its significance to American history. Who are the major figures involved? How did it affect the broader public? What might it indicate about where the country was and where it is headed?

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In another entry, identify a major production that has come to The National Theatre since 2019. You can search the archive of reviews at [DC Theater Arts](#) to get a sense of what has come through our doors since then. Of those on offer, which is the most significant? What distinguishes it as a special theatrical event: important subject matter, innovative form, major box office success? Could it go down as another great milestone at The National?



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If you're really feeling insightful, tie these two entries together. Does one reflect on the other? If you were to see the selected show in light of the historical event you chose, how might it change your perception?

