



A Guide to

LIFE x 3



PITTSBURGH PUBLIC THEATER'S STUDY GUIDE



by Yasmina Reza
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LIFE X 3 – By Yasmina Reza

Life x 3 is a three-act play in which almost the same scene is replayed three times. It is evening and Henri and Sonia are at home, their son Arnaud already tucked in bed. Henri is a research scientist, and he has invited his superior, Hubert Finidori and his wife, Ines, over for dinner the next night. But suddenly the Finidoris show up – a day early.

The guests are not turned away even though Henri and Sonia are completely unprepared to entertain (or basically even deal with) them. There isn't even enough food to nibble on though at least there is sufficient wine. It makes for an awkward evening – and this awkward evening is replayed three times. Changing only relatively small things, Reza shows how differently events can unfold. She also increases the darkness quotient with each new section of the play.

A few elements are common to all three variations: the child is reluctant to fall asleep. Ines gets a "ladder" (run) in her stocking. Hubert tells Henri that the paper Henri has devoted years to and pinned his professional hopes on, sounds much like a paper someone else has submitted.

In each act events unfold differently around these three main elements. A minor change in attitude by any one of the characters snowballs, leading to a different outcome. Henri is paralyzed by fear and insecurity in one act and almost completely in control in another. Sonia is embarrassed when Henri is subservient to Hubert, and in some scenes is willing to entertain Hubert's romantic overtures.

Hubert can help Henri advance his career so Henri needs his help. Hubert's revelation about the similar paper circulating can be seen as entirely malicious or as a helpful heads-up. Reza allows for a number of variations in their personal relationships as well as that including the two women.

The play, like most of Reza's work, is almost entirely about personal dynamics. Reza suggests that with a proper attitude life can be lived happily, and conversely, with a bad attitude life can be hell (witness Henri in the first act).

Any one of the episodes would make an excellent short play in itself, but the cumulative effect is much more than that of the three unrelated pieces.

YASMINA REZA

Yasmina Reza rises early on Tuesdays because Monday is her only night off from appearing onstage in her new play, *Trois Versions de la Vie*, at the Theatre Antoine in Paris. A mother of two, with a movie director for a companion, she has a tight schedule. She speeds off to make tea, visibly humming with nervous energy. An English-French dictionary lies open on a table in her Left Bank apartment. She has been skimming the British reviews of her new play, which has also just opened at the National Theater in London.



Who could have imagined that the alcoholic and blundering, comical and hysterical wife of *Trois Versions de la Vie* would be played with extravagant fantasy by the playwright herself? It didn't start out that way. When one of the actors pulled out during rehearsals, the director asked Reza to step in. It was not a bizarre idea. She was the right age and type, she was an actress before she turned playwright in the late 80's, and she knew the lines.

Her first play, *Art* - a comedy in which arguments over an all white painting expose the hidden tensions among three long-time male friends - won the Tony Award in New York in 1998 and has now been translated into 35 languages. *Life x 3*, Ms Reza's latest work, opened in 2000 simultaneously in four cities - Athens and Vienna as well as Paris and London.

Yasmina Reza's two books, both autobiographical, reflect a dark vision of life. She was born in Paris to a Hungarian mother who was a violinist who decided to settle in Paris when the Iron Curtain fell, and a Jewish Iranian-Russian father whose family fled Bolshevism in 1917. She had a cosmopolitan childhood in a comfortable, artistic, music-loving family, open minded about the world.

"To be honest, I was an actress who was not much in demand," she recalls. But even if my career was going well, I wasn't made for it, the life of slavery. At the age of 23, 24, I saw myself sitting by the phone waiting for it to ring. It's not a life, waiting for someone to want you."

She began writing slowly because she decided she decided that everything had already been said and she had to express herself through "a singular voice." Audiences laugh at Reza's plays, but she would argue that they are not comedies. "My plays are tragedy, funny tragedy." Her works, written in French, often center on the despair that seeps through her characters' trivial conversations. She sets out to say all through the trivial, the tragic through the comic, and the serious through levity, a kind of search for the absolute.

STRING THEORY

The whole (so to speak) dark matter stuff is simply what scientists call the “missing matter” in the universe. Models predict that if there is X amount of matter in the universe it would contract at a certain point: Y amount, fall static and fizzle; Z amount, it keeps expanding. From what astrophysicists can tell the universe shows no sign of slowing its expansion, but the current amount of visible matter (galaxies, stars, black holes, quasars, etc.) doesn’t account for it – theoretically, it should collapse. So the missing matter is called “dark matter” because it fills in the gap and helps to explain (maybe) why the universe is expanding. Also, scientists believe most of the mass of any galaxy is dominated by dark matter because the total amount of visible matter in any spiral galaxy doesn’t explain why the rotational speed of a galaxy is relatively flat. That means that the outer rim of a galaxy should move more slowly than the core, but it doesn’t. Therefore, there’s “something else” out there that’s keeping a galaxy spinning without flailing apart.

Poincare – one of the founders of modern chaos theory and helped to develop international time zones. Would have been a contemporary of Einstein, but died in 1912 from a prostate problem. Two quotes of his that might help the cast are “To doubt everything or to believe everything are two equally convenient solutions; both dispense with the necessity of reflection” and “Science is built up with facts, as a house is with stones. But a collection of facts is no more a science than a heap of stones is a house.” Which leads to the Grand Unification Theory...

Unification Theory – Einstein went to his grave trying to figure this one out, and it bugged physicists like Hawking since. In the early days of science, electricity and magnetism were considered two different forces, until it was discovered that they were the same – hence, “electromagnetism.” Grand unification is based on the idea that at extremely high energies, all forces should behave equally. There are four forces in nature: gravity, the strong nuclear force, the weak nuclear force, and the electromagnetic force. Beyond grand unification, there is also speculation that it may be possible to merge gravity with the other three gauge symmetries into a theory of everything.

Trouble is, the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics operate on two different levels. Relativity deals particles at the atomic level – $E=mc^2$, which means you can release a tremendous amount of energy with a small amount of matter. (i.e., a nuclear explosion) However, quantum mechanics deals with particles at the subatomic level, which behave quite differently than their greater wholes. You mentioned string theory – this is yet another theory (highly debatable, btw because it requires the creation of extra dimensions) that tries to reconcile how subatomic particles behave in order to reach that quantum theory of gravity, one of the holy grails. (I’ve always hated the term “quantum leap” because it’s an oxymoron.) Just to give you an idea – the Heisenberg Principle states that you cannot know a particle’s location or speed at the

same time – you can only know one or the other because simply by observing it, you affect its state. This is often referenced in the thought experiment, Schrödinger's cat. A cat is kept in box with a particle of radioactive matter that will decay at some point and release a poison, killing the cat. However, since you don't know when the particle will decay and how long it would take for the cat to die without physically observing it, the cat is both living and dead at the same time. As soon as you observe it, you've changed its state.

One of the reasons why physicists want to figure this out is because we would be able to control gravity the way we do electromagnetism. Gravity is actually a very weak force – even though it bends light (which is made of particle-waves, a completely different story) and can affect the tides, it can't pull you through the earth if you jump up off a chair onto the floor – the nuclear forces that bind our atoms together stop that from happening. There are some who believe as well that everything in the universe is "one" because we are all made of the exploding star stuff that created our solar system, which was made from an older star, which was probably born after the Big Bang. Everything (not just matter, but the physical and mathematical laws of our universe) were created in that single instant, so they must still hold true – it's just a matter of piecing everything together, but in reverse. The carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, potassium, etc. in your body came from the stars – as did the rocks we walk on, even the hydrocarbons human altered into polymers to make the plastic cup on your desk. I think that may be some of what Hubert is speaking of on page 40...we can take the universe down to the most irreducible action (strings, quarks, gluons, muons, etc.) but you still don't understand what makes it *real*. So the quantum particles are as much a part of us as we are a part of the universe. That means we are not simple observers, but actors, as well.

A standard of science is that "Whatever isn't forbidden is required," or Occam's Razor: All things being equal, the simplest solution tends to be the best one. Theoretically, the theory of everything is the simplest solution, but also the most complex. What nags many is that maybe it only exists because we *think* it should.

Last thing I leave you with: one of my favorite stories from college was from Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson: Refutation of Bishop Berkely*
"After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the nonexistence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it – 'I refute it thus.'"
James Boswell: *Life of Samuel Johnson book 3*.

Quotes from Stephen W. Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*

Today scientists describe the universe in terms of two basic partial theories - the general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics... The general theory of relativity describes the force of gravity and the large-scale structure of the universe, that is, the structure on scales from only a few miles to as large as a million million million million (1 with twenty-four zeros after it) miles, the size of the observable universe. Quantum mechanics, on the other hand, deals with phenomena on extremely small scales, such as a millionth of a millionth of an inch. Unfortunately, however, these two theories are known to be inconsistent with each other - they cannot both be correct.

The discovery of a complete unified theory, therefore, may not aid the survival of our species. It may not even affect our life-style. But ever since the dawn of civilization, people have not been content to see events as unconnected and inexplicable. They have craved an understanding of the underlying order in the world. Today we still yearn to know why we are here and where we came from. Humanity's deepest desire for knowledge is justification enough for our continuing quest. And our goal is nothing less than a complete description of the universe we live in.

<http://www.generationterrorists.com/quotes/abhotswh.html>.

<http://astro.berkeley.edu/~mwhite/darkmatter/dm.html>.

These notes were compiled by Paul Kovach who is Vice President for College Communication at Chatham College.

The Americanization of YASMINA REZA

An excerpt from American Theatre Magazine (Jan 2007)

By David Ng

The popularity of Yasmina Reza owes much to the translators of her plays. Their thankless work makes it possible for that other form of “translation” to take place—the acceptance of a foreign playwright by an American audience. Reza’s work is undeniably “French”—intellectual, declamatory, minimalist—and yet theatre audiences in places like Florida and Oklahoma welcome her like a hometown favorite. Her plays have that uncanny ability to feel completely foreign and completely American at the same time.

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The Linguistic alchemy that goes into (re-) producing Reza’s plays for U.S. audience is mysterious and complex. Those who have immersed themselves in her work, whether as translators, producers, or directors, point to different subtleties that make Reza’s words ideal for export.

“She usually takes a small facet of life and goes in-depth into that, rather than taking a huge problem and trying to cover lots of ground,” says Frank Heibert, who has translated Reza’s writing into German. “She approaches problems of the human soul in a way we haven’t seen or read from 50,000 other writers. But it is not so particular that you would feel puzzled. I think that’s an entertaining aspect to all of her theatre—but it’s never hollow, flat entertainment where you forget it right away.”

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When *Art* and *Life X 3* were debuting on Broadway, Hampton and Reza flew to New York to work on Americanizing the language. They collaborated with the actors to add American slang and speech rhythms. During rehearsals, a curious thing emerged. Reza found that the American amendments were somehow closer to the French than the British versions. According to Hampton, she said they had the direct, straightforward simplicity that she likes.

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Ives notes that Reza writes challenging monologues that give actors a chance to strut their stuff. “The truth is that half the reason her plays get done is because actors want to do them,” he says. “Her plays are so chewy for actors. I think that colleges want to get their fingers into *Life X 3* because it’s the kind of intellectual card game that students like to do. There’s a crackling surface there for a performer.”

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In the U.S. and Canada, Reza is popular with regional theatres. Together, her plays have seen close to 170 professional productions in these countries since 1998, according to data from Dramatists Play Service. Her most popular work by far remains *Art*, which has been in almost 150 productions in North America.

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It's often said that a comedy is the most difficult thing to translate to another language. But the often hilarious plays of Yasmina Reza are an exception to that generality. If anything, they become funnier when performed in English.

When Reza attended the London premier of *Art*, she was startled by the amount of laughter in the audience. In France, the audiences hadn't laughed nearly as much or as loudly.

"What have you done?" she asked Christopher Hampton after the curtain.

"I guess the English find *Art* much more amusing than the French," he said.

Americans do, too. Anyone who attended the Broadway run of *Art* (which starred Alan Alda, Victor Garber, and Alfred Molina) can attest to the convulsive, almost uncontrollable laughter.

In 1999, Reza explained her dismay to the *Los Angeles Times*. "I would not say I'm not happy to see people laugh, but I would like them to laugh at the right moments," she said. " But you can't direct an audience; they do what they want."

YOUTH CLASSES AT THE PUBLIC - SUMMER 2007

Acting Workshop: Scene Study (Ages 13-17)

June 18–29

This popular two-week workshop that features some of the Public's best guest artists as instructors will focus on the actor's character development, objectives, subtexts and scene work. As always, experienced and new actors are welcome; dedication and enthusiasm are the only prerequisites. Class meets from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm, Monday through Friday. \$275 Instructor: Amy Landis

Playwriting (Ages 13-17)

June 25–July 13

This three-week introductory course is composed of intensive writing exercises that illuminate the basic tenets of playwriting and screenwriting. Students ages 13 to 17 will be encouraged to find the dramatic connections between their work and their personal experiences. This course culminates in a reading of the students' work by a company of professional actors. Class meets Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm. \$225 Instructor: Rob Zellers

Acting Workshop: Making It Real

Ages 10-12 July 2-13

How does an actor make it real? How do you make the audience believe you? Students are guided through an exploration of the basic skills of acting that will address these questions. In-class exercises in improvisation, character development, and movement will help students find truthfulness in the art of acting. Class meets Mondays through Fridays 10:00 am - 1:00 pm. (No class on July 4) \$225 Instructor: Sarah Carleton

Acting Workshop: Shakespeare Intensive

Ages 13-17 July 9–27

If you are interested in learning more about classical acting, this class is for you. The focus, as always, will be on character development with additional work in vocalization and movement. Students approach Shakespeare from an actor's perspective, using the text and verse to develop character. Class meets Monday through Friday from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm and culminates in an actual performance of one of the works of William Shakespeare. \$325

Enroll online at www.ppt.org/education.htm

*For more information contact Rob Zellers, Education Director, 412-316-8200 x 715
or Kelly Mednis, Education Coordinator, 412-316-8200 x 721*