

# BECKY SHAW

by Gina Gionfriddo



RESOURCE PACK

**ALMEIDA**  
PROJECTS

# Introduction



Daisy Haggard  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

## Welcome to the Almeida Theatre's production of *Becky Shaw*.

When Suzanna sets up the unknown Becky Shaw, with her closest friend Max, little can she forecast the seismic effect it will have on their lives. No modern day Emma Woodhouse, Suzanna's charitable matchmaking leads to a catastrophic first date, that ultimately causes each character in the play to reassess their relationship with one other, forced to clarify the future lives they envisage for themselves.

As each character's reaction to the disastrous first date spirals out of their control, the action speeds by and the plot quite literally thickens, denying the audience a chance to find a stable moral high ground or to take sides in the racing conflict. The result is an unsettling experience: the broad humour found in the uncomfortable circumstances offset with a bitter reality of its characters' hopelessness; their desperate search for love and happiness in a world where the universal idealism of their generation keeps both constantly out of reach.

Gina Gionfriddo's play draws on the eponymous heroines of novels in the 19th Century, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* being a key influence. That novel's anti-heroine, Becky Sharp, is driven by social ambition to flout the conventional rules of courtship of the day, an idea that was echoed through many of Jane Austen's subsequent books. In 2010, Austen's England is far behind us. Gender lines blur and the rules of courtship are made by as they go along – or are they? How much have things changed, and is that for better or worse? *Becky Shaw* does not answer either question but gives us a classical tale of social ambition and love with a distinctly 21st Century 'post-Hollywood' sensibility.

The play asks to what extent Becky's desperation and neediness requires others around her to rise to the occasion. Gionfriddo asks the questions, 'What do you owe a desperate stranger? What do you owe her when you invited her in?' Social obligation and morality are heady points of contention. At the heart of the play is a shrewd exploration of how difficult it can be to act charitably, especially to people you don't particularly like.

We look forward to welcoming you to the Almeida Theatre and hope that *Becky Shaw* will entertain, challenge and inspire you and your students to experience further the power of live theatre.

Charlie Payne  
Samantha Lane, Natalie Mitchell, Anaelisa Jaramillo  
Almeida Projects

For more information about Almeida Projects and our recent work please visit  
[www.almeida.co.uk/education](http://www.almeida.co.uk/education)

# Contents

## HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE PACK

This Almeida Projects Resource Pack aims to provide an insight into our process of taking the production from research stage to performance. We hope you will use it to help you in your own investigations into the play both before and after your visit to the Almeida Theatre.

The pack is divided into four sections: the first contains detailed information on the plot and characters to refresh your memory of the play in the classroom. The second contains production-specific articles on the creative process, with exclusive input from the artistic team. The third section provides context by covering background material and themes from the play. The final section contains suggestions of practical exercises for drama teachers to use, to enable students to explore the play in further depth, in the classroom and beyond.

## LEARNING AREAS

Key learning areas have been identified under the following subjects:

- **AS/A Level Drama or Theatre Studies**
- **AS/A Level English Literature**

This Resource Pack intends to supplement the academic study of *Becky Shaw* by providing context-specific information about the Almeida Theatre's production of the play, covering the following areas:

- **Staging and world of the play**
- **Production-specific research and context**
- **Rehearsal process**

This pack will also supplement the exercises undertaken in Almeida Projects' Introductory Workshop and is designed to give students wider understanding of some of the issues featured directly in the narrative of the play.

# Contents

Production Credits	3
Introduction to the Play	4
Characters	5
Detailed Plot Summary	6
Design	13
Gina Gionfriddo	15
Author's Note	16
Writer/Director Interview	18
In the Rehearsal Room	22
<i>Vanity Fair</i>	29
Place in <i>Becky Shaw</i>	30
Social Class in America	33
Multiple Sclerosis	35
Themes	36
Practical Exercises	39
Almeida Projects	41



## **Becky Shaw** by Gina Gionfriddo

Max  
Susan  
Becky  
Suzanna  
Andrew

David Wilson Barnes  
Haydn Gwynne  
Daisy Haggard  
Anna Madeley  
Vincent Montuel

Director  
Design  
Lighting  
Sound  
Casting

Peter DuBois  
Jonathan Fensom  
Tim Mitchell  
John Leonard  
Suzanne Crowley &  
Gilly Poole  
Penny Dyer  
Arthur Pita  
Ben Brynmor

Dialect  
Movement  
Assistant Director

Production Manager  
Company Manager  
Stage Manager  
Deputy Stage Manager  
Assistant Stage Manager  
Costume Supervisor  
Wigs and Make-up by  
Wardrobe Supervisor  
Wardrobe Deputy  
Wig Mistress  
Chief Technician  
Lighting Technician  
Sound Technician  
Theatre Technician  
Stage Crew

Igor  
Emma Basilico  
Xenia Lewis  
Erin Murphy  
Kerry Lynch  
Sarah Bower  
Michael Ward at Hum  
Catrina Richardson  
Eleanor Dolan  
Jessica O'Shea  
Jason Wescombe  
Robin Fisher  
Howard Wood  
Adriano Agostino  
Ben Lee  
Pradeep Dash  
Craig Emerson  
Miraculous Engineering  
Charlotte Gainey  
Hugo Glendinning  
Mathilda Spjuth

Production Carpenter  
Set built by  
Set painted by  
Photography by  
Wardrobe Work Placement  
Stage Management Work  
Placement

Zoe Macbeth

### **ALMEIDA THEATRE**

Artistic Director  
Executive Director  
Artistic Associate

Michael Attenborough  
James Bierman  
Jenny Worton

### **ALMEIDA PROJECTS**

Director of Projects  
Projects Co-ordinator  
Projects Administrator  
Schools Residency Co-ordinator  
Projects Admin Assistant

Samantha Lane  
Natalie Mitchell  
Charlie Payne  
Joanna Mackie  
Anaelisa Jaramillo



Daisy Haggard

Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Suzanna is grieving the loss of her father, Richard, who passed away months earlier. The family - including Max - have come together to assess their impending financial hardship. Susan, Richard's late wife and Suzanna's mother, has taken up a new, much younger lover, much to her daughter's disgust. Susan urges Suzanna to move forward and leave the past behind. Max agrees and he and Suzanna ignite a mutual passion that has been dormant for the 25 years of their friendship.

Four months later and Suzanna has met and married Andrew in a whirlwind romance. Andrew is a young writer who's taken a more stable job as an office manager. There he has met Becky Shaw, an office temp who appears to be going through a difficult period in her life. Andrew thinks she seems nice and Suzanna agrees to set her up on a blind date with Max.

However all does not go to plan as their awkward date turns into catastrophe. Becky's desperation to improve her self-confessed failure of a life and find love result in the other characters being forced to rise to the occasion. Becky's manipulation – deliberate or otherwise – causes sparks to fly in the characters' established relationships: Suzanna and Andrew's young marriage; Andrew and Max's newly-found positions as the men in Suzanna's life; Suzanna and Max's love for each other.

## Soundtrack

*Anecdote* - Ambulance LTD  
*I Got You Babe* - Sonny & Cher  
*Take Me Out* - Franz Ferdinand  
*Fix It* - Ryan Adams And The Cardinals  
*Broken Boy Soldier* - The Raconteurs  
*Wolf Like Me* - TV On The Radio  
*Shadowplay* - The Killers  
*I Feel it All* - Feist  
*Never Miss a Beat* - Kaiser Chiefs  
*Waltz #2 (xo)* - Elliott Smith  
*Hands* - The Raconteurs

Meanwhile, Susan's new lover, Lester, has maxed out his credit cards and finds himself in trouble with the law. Suzanna and Max's increasing fear for Susan's health and welfare bring the family back together in a final scene where tough decisions are made. Despite the comedy found in the situations throughout the play, its dark and uncomfortable conclusion shows a difficult compromise where no one has quite got what they asked for.

**A detailed plot summary follows.**

# Characters



## SUZANNA SLATER

Suzanna, 35, is daughter of Susan and step-brother (although they are not actually related) to Max. She is a fiery, emotional person and was deeply affected by her father's death. She is very attracted to Max, and they have a combative relationship but based on love. She is married to Andrew, who she also loves. She is studying for a PhD in Psychology and works at a clinic treating young children. She cannot come to terms with her mother's new lover and often plays the child (or victim) in situations.



## SUSAN SLATER

Susan, in her late fifties, is mother of Suzanna and wife of the late Richard. She is suffering from Multiple Sclerosis, which was diagnosed when Suzanna was a child, but has worsened. She has a strong mind and a pragmatic approach to emotional matters, a cause of tension with Suzanna. She is of a different generation to the other characters and has a distinct attitude towards love, death and relationships. She has recently begun a relationship with Lester, a much younger man. Susan's marriage to Richard was long and content - not without imperfection, but she had a realistic and accepting approach to how to make it last.



## MAX GARRETT

Max is 36. He was brought up by Susan and Richard Slater, after his mother died from cancer when he was a child. His father, a white collar criminal who has been repeatedly in jail, was not interested in bringing him up himself. He and Suzanna grew up together and are very close. Max is now a financial advisor with many wealthy clients. He has been managing the estate of Richard, after his death. Max is a serial womaniser who has had many relationships, none of which last longer than three months. He despises visible weakness in others.



## ANDREW PORTER

Andrew is 31 and married to Suzanna. He is a writer, currently completing a book, and has recently had to leave his job in a coffee shop to take full-time employment as an office manager - a move that he hates. Andrew met Suzanna whilst on a ski trip. He was drawn to her in grief, wanting to heal her. He is a creative thinker and less interested in earning a high salary than enjoyment of life. He has strong ideals, is supportive and sympathetic. His approach often contrasts extremely with Max. He is drawn to vulnerable women. He supports Becky when she is suicidal but remains loyal to Suzanna.



## BECKY SHAW

Becky Shaw, 35, works as a temp in Andrew's office. She is in a period of 'transition' in her life. She has little money, no mobile phone or car and she no longer speaks to her family. She did attend Brown University, under a scholarship, but dropped out. She has had two previous relationships with black men, which led to her being cut off from her family, and dropping all her female friends. She is highly emotional and has been in therapy a number of times. She is keen to settle down. In her mid-30s, she feels pressure to be secure in her life, and to find a partner. She feels she has made a mess of her life.



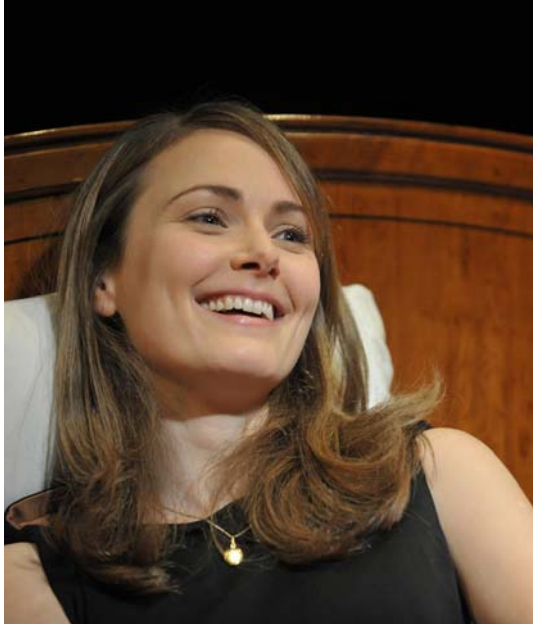
Anna Madeley, Vincent Montuel and Daisy Haggard  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

## Scene One

A hotel in New York City. Suzanna is sat in her room, watching a true crime programme on television. She wears a black dress. Max enters, letting himself into her room, and announces that Suzanna's mother, Susan, will soon be arriving. Max has paid for both Suzanna and her mother's hotel rooms – something that Suzanna picks on as a sign that her family is in financial hardship. The family are assembling that evening to discuss the estate of Suzanna's father, Richard, who died four months ago. Suzanna is still mourning his death and is angry that her mother has brought another man, Lester, along with her. An angry scene in the hotel lobby earlier led Suzanna to decide not to speak to her mother again.

Susan enters. She has Multiple Sclerosis and uses a cane to walk. Max tries to placate the situation and encourages the women to forget their argument and focus on the task in hand: dinner and discussion of the family's financial affairs. However, Susan and Suzanna have a heated exchange that Max fails to quell, during which we learn that Max was taken into the family after his mother's death. His father was not very interested in bringing him up along and so Max was raised by Susan and Richard. Max is now a rich accountant, who manages large sums of money, and wants to help to sort out the serious financial difficulties they face – which are a result of the failing family business. However, Susan refuses to discuss the money matters that Max is pushing for, accusing him of trying to gain power over her. Suzanna is appalled that her mother has taken a lover so soon - as she perceives - after her father's death, and continues to state that the loss of her father is a devastating event; Susan dismisses Suzanna's 'play-acting' of continued mourning and urges her to move on with life.

Max returns to the subject of money, and alleges that Richard had been romantically involved with his male business partner, Yoshi, which led to the business failing. Susan leaves angrily dismissing Max and inviting Suzanna to dinner with her and Lester – but only if she apologises to him first. Max and Suzanna are left alone discussing the relationship between Susan and Richard, and the secrets that the family kept. Max and Suzanna begin to discuss what Susan will need to do next, given her illness and financial hardship. We learn that Suzanna is studying for a PhD in Psychology. They reminisce about their upbringing together. Max also urges Suzanna to move on from her grief,



Anna Madeley  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

*You didn't lose a child or even a breast. Your father died of natural causes after a life well lived. That's not loss, it's transition.*

Susan  
Scene One

dismissing therapy as unhelpful; instead he suggests she takes part in practical activities – like a ski trip. The mood lightens and Max suggests watching pornography. They briefly discuss love, sex and their different ideals, before they start watching a horror film, *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Suzanna recounts a moment at a rock concert where she felt truly happy. Max kisses Suzanna, who is initially uncomfortable, but eventually reciprocates passionately.

## Scene Two

It is Friday night in the living room of Suzanna and Andrew's apartment in Rhode Island, eight months after Scene 1. Suzanna is leaving a fifth answer phone message for her mother in Florida, as she has received a call from her health insurance company and is concerned that something has happened. Andrew and Suzanna are waiting for Max and Becky to arrive for dinner – a blind date they have set up. Becky is a temp at Andrew's office and he has known her for just a month. We learn that Andrew is a writer, who has just started a new full-time job as an office manager, after leaving his work in a coffee shop. Andrew hates his job, and he and Suzanna have a heated discussion about money and the cost of living. Andrew would like to move to a smaller, cheaper apartment until he has finished writing his book and Suzanna her degree. Their argument is interrupted by the arrival of Max.

Suzanna asks Max if he will attend a commemoration of her father's death the following week. Max is critical and dismissive of the event, contrasting with Andrew's sympathy. Max discusses a recent date he has been on, and they talk about the Iraq war. Max is acerbic and Andrew asks that he takes a mellower tone with Becky, his blind date, as she is delicate. They are interrupted by a phone call from Becky, who is calling from a local shop as she doesn't have a mobile phone.

Andrew leaves to collect her leaving Suzanna and Max alone together. Max remarks on how fast Suzanna's relationship with Andrew moved: a four month courtship then a Vegas wedding three months ago. We discover they met on the ski trip that Max encouraged Suzanna to go on in the previous scene. Suzanna asks Max's advice about money and if they could afford to stay in their apartment if they earn less.

Andrew returns, with Becky. She is overdressed and the introductions are awkward, before Suzanna remembers her mother and leaves to try calling again. Max comments on Becky's flushed face, and Becky tells him that she has been walking around as her cab arrived early - she reveals that she does not have a car as she does not have much money. Max changes the



Daisy Haggard  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

*Can you stop fixating on my words? Becky is a great catch. She's available because she's in a transitional life space.*

Andrew  
Scene Two

subject to enquire after Susan. Suzanna returns, having not been able to get hold of her mother; she refuses to call Lester. Andrew apologises to Becky, for talking about family matters. Becky reveals that she doesn't even speak to her family. Max criticises Suzanna and Andrew, and calls Lester himself, leaving the room. Suzanna apologises to Becky and gives some advice on how to handle Max before he re-enters. Max reports that Susan forgot her cane and fell by the pool – she is fine and has just bruised her knees. We learn that Lester's credit cards are maxed out and he cannot use them, which was a surprise to Susan who gave him money to pay them off. Max had arranged the transfer and instead of paying off the credit cards directly, gave the money to Lester who spent it on film equipment. Max had set him up to fail and for this and Suzanna is grateful.

They put the subject aside and agree to try to start the night over. We learn a little about Becky: she moved to Rhode Island from North Carolina when she was eleven and was attending the prestigious Brown University, but dropped out. Max then encourages Suzanna to tell a story about a child she met at the clinic where she is working; Max is critical of her job and psychotherapy. Becky admits she has been in therapy, to which Max retorts that her therapy has not worked, as she herself has reported that she has no money, no car and does not even speak to her family. There is a flirtatious edge to Becky's response. Max announces that he is hungry and Suzanna backs out of dinner as she wants to speak to her mother. They decide that Max and Becky will go out for dinner instead; Max asks Becky to reassure Andrew that she will have fun. She obliges and there is a moment of stillness before Becky and Max leave.

### Scene Three

Monday, two days after the previous scene, outside Andrew and Becky's office. Becky is rehearsing saying something to Andrew who enters handing her lunch. Becky tells Andrew that she and Max were robbed at gunpoint on their date; she feels responsible having suggested they go to a bar in an unsafe area of town. We learn that the robber held Becky at gunpoint, whilst Max volunteered to get more money from his car – he gave the robber \$200 and a camera before he made off. Andrew is relieved that Becky was not hurt, although Becky says that she was hurt and asks Andrew for a hug. He notices she's trembling and hugs her again. Andrew suggests she talks to a therapist and Becky says that won't be possible as she cannot even afford a sandwich at lunch. She feels that her life is a mess, and is distressed that no-one in her family speaks to her. Andrew offers to find low-

# Plot Summary



Vincent Montuel and Daisy Haggard  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

*You and I have been through hell with our parents. Cancer, MS, jail, death... What happened to Becky and me... It doesn't even rank.*

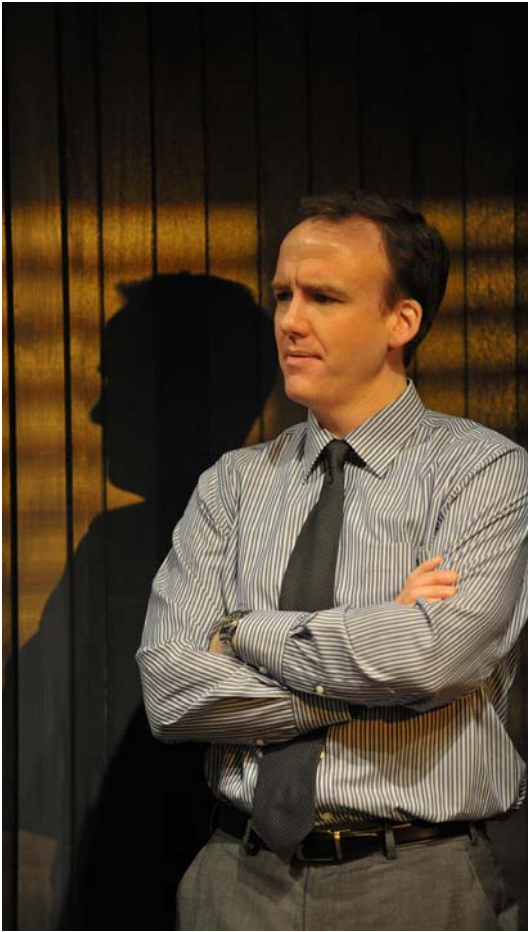
Max  
Scene Four

cost therapy which Becky rejects. She asks Andrew to get Max to call her that night, as he is not returning her calls. Andrew agrees.

## Scene Four

Later the same day, in Boston, Max and Suzanna are in Max's hotel room. Suzanna has driven over to smooth things over after an angry telephone call between Andrew and Max. Suzanna is angry that Max had not told her that he was robbed at gunpoint. She talks about Max's father who has previously been arrested twice and is a white collar criminal. Max dismisses this - he does not like talking about difficult things as they ruin his free time. Suzanna pushes Max to call Becky and he refuses; he says that friends should respect each others choices even if they don't like them and refers to Suzanna marrying Andrew.

Suzanna wants to know why Max is unhappy about her marriage to Andrew. He admits that this is because they slept together (in the hotel room in New York, after Scene One); after knowing each other for 25 years it did change their relationship, as it made him territorial. Suzanna points out that Max had then started dating Christa. They agree that neither of them took the next steps towards a relationship after they slept together and they return to discussing the robbery. Max feels, in context of the other things that have happened in their lives, it is a non-event and he won't talk to Becky about it. Max criticises Suzanna for setting him up with Becky, who he thinks is desperate and beneath him. Suzanna says that she'll help Max: she will tell him what to say to Becky in one telephone call, and then it will all be over.



David Wilson Barnes  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

*You know the all-female table in the bar? Women drinking Midori sours pretending to like each other while they scan for men.*

Becky  
Scene Five

## Scene Five

The following evening, in Becky's apartment. Becky and Andrew are sharing pizza and beer. Becky called Andrew over because she heard a strange noise and since the robbery has been anxious. She thanks Andrew for getting Suzanna to talk to Max and Andrew criticises Max. Becky asks why he set her up with Max in the first place. Andrew explains that he had only met Max once before and he trusted Suzanna's judgment. Andrew then tells Becky about his intense relationship with Suzanna, how they met on the ski trip after her father's death - he wanted to fix her sadness and they married very quickly. Becky remarks that Suzanna is no longer delicate.

Becky talks about how the robber was black and reveals she has been having racist feelings and fantasies of torturing black men. She has had two previous relationships with black men that caused her to leave her university and her family to abandon her. Andrew reassures her that her racist feelings are the result of her trauma and she won't act on them. She challenges the notion that men want intense women and says that she has thought of cutting herself with a knife. Andrew says that he will protect her and offers to take her to hospital. Becky has no female friends to call, as she lost contact with them all when she started her last relationship.

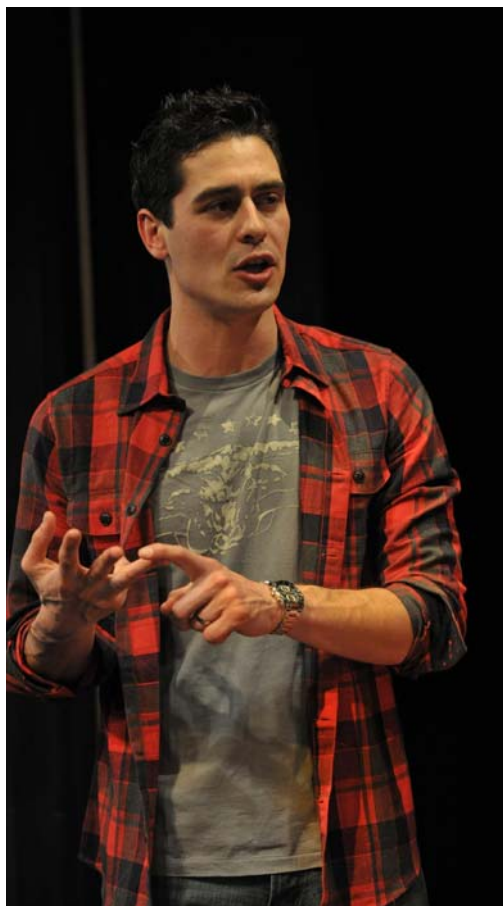
Becky reveals that following the robbery, they went to the police station and then had a drink in a hotel, where she then slept with Max. Max then gave her a cab fare home and wouldn't let her stay overnight. Andrew says that he will take care of Becky and she must never contact Max again.

## Scene Six

Wednesday night, in Max's hotel room in Boston. Suzanna is criticising Max for his behaviour towards Becky. Max says he has a sleep disorder and can't use sleeping tablets as he has to perform well at work and cannot jeopardise his job. Suzanna demands that Max call Becky, as she tells him Becky is suicidal and Andrew is afraid to leave her alone. He finally agrees to call Becky after he sees how distressed Suzanna is, but he warns her that Andrew likes vulnerable women.

## Scene 7

The next day, Max and Becky meet in a café. Becky apologises for calling repeatedly and Max apologises in turn for not responding to her messages. She suggests that their next date should be a daytime zoo trip, however Max says that the robbery incident interrupted the normal dating process and he cannot



Vincent Montuel

Photo: Hugo Glendinning

*Your generation is fixated on 'intimacy'. That's why your marriages don't last. You think marriage and family require absolute honesty. They do not.*

Susan

Scene Nine

see her again. Becky asks Max if he would have wanted to see her again if the robbery hadn't happened; when he doesn't respond positively she says she understands if he was embarrassed about his behaviour during the hold up. Becky pushes Max to find out when he decided she wasn't her type and why he slept with her. Max tells Becky that she pushes people to hurt her. Becky then reminds Max that he told her about sleeping with Suzanna and that Andrew doesn't know, hinting at blackmail. Max responds angrily, grabbing Becky's arm and she loudly asks him to stop hurting her. Max says he knew the minute he met Becky she was a scary person. Becky responds that he shouldn't have slept with her, and that if she really was scary, she would have just screamed and had him arrested for assault.

## Scene 8

Later the same day, in Suzanna and Andrew's apartment. Andrew has just told Suzanna that Max assaulted Becky in the café. Suzanna is angry because Andrew made her leave work. Andrew says that Max is out of their lives, because he assaulted Becky. Suzanna is angry and says that Andrew has to stop manufacturing drama and stop being a saviour to Becky – he should be Suzanna's saviour. Andrew says that Suzanna treated Becky like garbage, both personally and in setting her up with Max, and he finds her lack of compassion unattractive.

Andrew says he is going to leave and stay with friends for a few days. Suzanna tells Andrew that he is good, like her father, to which Andrew points out her father was an irresponsible alcoholic. Suzanna tells Andrew that her father bought Max, something Max should never know; he did this as he was a good man who did not want to let Max suffer, drawing a parallel with the way that Andrew is trying to look after Becky. Suzanna asks Andrew if he has feelings for Becky, but Andrew states that Becky is not the problem and that they should talk in a few days.

## Scene 9

The next day, in Susan's living room. Suzanna enters with two big duffel bags. Max follows, to say they should get their story straight, as to why Andrew isn't there. We learn that Lester is in jail because of suspected mail fraud - a serious offence that Max is helping to deal with.

Susan enters and asks after Andrew. Suzanna tells her mother that he is helping a co-worker; Susan guesses at Andrew having an affair and that they have separated. Susan then immediately addresses Max to ask about Lester. She asks him to find a good lawyer and makes him call, even though it's a Saturday.

Susan and Suzanna argue about their relationships, before Max returns to announce that he has found a lawyer for Lester and he is going to meet him. Suzanna tells her mother that the fact that her father may have been homosexual has upset her, but Susan retorts that Max is playing power games – something she believes he has always done but that she thought brought with it a certain security for Suzanna. Susan advises Suzanna that marriages do not require total honesty, that if you look too closely you will always find something that you don't want, but this does not mean that they cannot work. Suzanna does not know how she would manage without Max but at the same time she is revolted by him; she feels Andrew is a good a man whilst Max is not. Susan advises against chasing goodness as she believes it often goes together with incompetence; she suggests that Andrew must make up for his by loving her.



Haydn Gwynne  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

The doorbell rings and Andrew enters, followed by Becky. Becky has a bandage on her arm and needs to change it; Susan offers to help and starts to lead her off. Andrew and Suzanna are left alone and Andrew says that he has been asked to keep an eye on Becky following her hospital visit. Andrew has remembered that it is the anniversary of Suzanna's father's death and asks how she is feeling. He says he doesn't want to be with Becky. Andrew and Suzanna talk and renew their commitment to their marriage, agreeing that they will not see Max and Becky independently of each other and they will tell them as much today. Andrew exits to find Becky. Max enters and is furious that Andrew has brought Becky to the house. Suzanna tells Max that they cannot see each other alone any more and that she does not like how he ignores other people's pain. Suzanna suggests he should go back to Boston and that she can sort things out from here. Max states that she has washed her hands of him, but Becky says she does not want this.

Susan, Andrew and Becky re-enter. Susan wants to visit Lester in prison. Suzanna takes charge. She announces that Max will stay as he contacted the lawyer for Lester, and that she, along with Andrew and Becky, will return to Rhode Island. Susan argues that Suzanna has a responsibility to stay, but Suzanna will not allow Andrew and Becky to travel back together without her. Becky says she'd rather take the train. We learn that Susan has given Becky some advice: she needs to learn to lie, and not be a victim – being pitiful is unattractive. Susan cannot work out whether Becky has been victimised her whole life or is merely a con artist – she suspects she is somewhere between the two. Becky wonders if she had a chance with Max and Susan tells her to move on. Becky wonders if maybe she should stay with Max and Susan, just as Max returns to announce that the next train is at 4am. Max rudely dismisses Becky's idea of waiting for it, and so Becky leaves to drive back with Suzanna and Andrew. As they leave Andrew acknowledges the anniversary of Richards's death. Susan brushes this aside. Suzanna and Max have a moment of eye contact before she finally leaves.

Susan leaves Max alone, angry and hurt, in the room. After a moment, Becky re-enters. She tells him that she will be getting the 4am train - Andrew and Suzanna have left without her. Becky tells Max they will be fine without them. She says that they will both always be abandoned, as they were by their families, because they are both damaged. Max is struggling to stifle his fury but Becky remains composed. Susan returns as Max demands to take Becky to the station; however Susan disapproves of his tone and suggests they all have dinner and have a good time. She leaves the house. Becky takes a step towards Max who doesn't flinch, so she takes another step.



Almeida Theatre - empty stage  
Photo: Lara Platman

**A BRIEF HISTORY:**  
The Almeida Theatre seats 325 people, and re-opened in 2003 after extensive refurbishment. The building dates back to 1837, and was originally the Islington Scientific and Literary Institution. During the war it was used as a Salvation Army Citadel, and was later a toy factory, before it was converted into a theatre in the late 1970s.

**Design is one of the most thrilling aspects of theatre craft. The look of a show helps to set mood, atmosphere, time and place. Design elements for any production include set, lighting, sound and music.**

At the Almeida Theatre the set design is the first and last thing the audience sees. As soon as the audience enters they can see the set and this, together with any sound effects, or music, will begin to determine how they will experience the production. This initial impression helps to set the tone for the story to come.

The designer, therefore, has to consider what impression he wants to make on the audience before the play begins. The designer will look for clues in the play text and will liaise with the director and the playwright about these.

There are also practical considerations for the designer, such as how big the stage is; what kind of flexibility is required in terms of entrances and exits; and whether the play is set in a specific time period. The designer often has to be very creative designing a set which calls for several different locations.

### **Designing for the Almeida Theatre**

The Almeida Theatre was not purpose-built as a theatre so does not have the specialised architectural features which typify most purpose-built performance venues: a flytower, orchestra pit, wings, offstage area (indeed our 'back stage' is actually 'sub-stage' in the excavated basement directly below the stage floor). This means that our designers and production teams have to come up with ingenious solutions to create innovative sets in our 'found space'. The building is famous for its large curved brick wall at the back of the stage. This feature of the building is used as part of the set design for many of the Almeida's productions. Even when the actual wall is not visible in the set, the brickwork is often echoed as a feature in the design.



*Becky Shaw* Model Box. Clockwise from top left: Set detail from front stalls; set detail from side stalls; furniture samples; set as seen from above with revolve detail.

## *Becky Shaw* is designed by Jonathan Fensom.

The multi-location plot of *Becky Shaw* places huge demands on a designer. The variety of locations needing to be depicted are written into and underpinning the drama: from the family's initial meeting in a (specifically *three* star) hotel in New York City, to Suzanna and Andrew's shabby-chic Rhode Island studio, to the near chaos of Becky's flat and finally to the more monied antiquity of Susan's Richmond home. Each location tells us a lot about its inhabitants' class and lifestyle, and thus attention to visual detail in the furnishings and dressing of the set is crucial. The set is realistic and each object - from the wine glasses used by Suzanna and Andrew to the throw on Becky's sofa - has been carefully chosen by the designer to fulfill its purpose within the scheme of visual storytelling.

The style of writing is, to a degree, televisual, with the action moving fluidly from one scene - and location - to another, without losing momentum. To this end, designer Jonathan Fensom has created a set based on a revolve mechanism, with revolving walls moving in and out, creating a two-sided room for each location. The revolve is doubly complex in that the moving walls consist of and have drop down curtains and mechanised moveable pieces within them to enable the design to realise all of the locations written into the play on the Almeida's stage, which, whilst large in proportion in playing area, suffers from a lack of flying space above it and depth behind. The scene changes are fluid and the action of one room unfolds as another is closing. This makes for a busy show for the stage management team who must preset the following scene whilst another is playing. Music plays over many of the transitions to add to the smooth flow and keep the pace going.

The set for *Becky Shaw* includes a framing of the playing area, including masking of the upper area, bringing the height down in the form of a proscenium. This also serves to conceal some of the mechanicals of the revolve, but also focusing our attention onto the action down into the rooms that appear, and again complementing the closely observed, intimate and televisual nature of the production.

## Gina Gionfriddo is an American playwright, who has written for both theatre and television.

Gina Gionfriddo's passion for writing and theatre began at a young age. As a child she kindled her interest by writing short scenes and during high school became involved in performing. After becoming frustrated at the roles available to her as a teenage actor, she returned to playwriting, where her real ambition was for using words and storytelling. She went on to graduate from Barnard College in New York. Whilst studying in New York she undertook a theatre internship at a venue where new writing was prominent, which enabled her to see first hand how playwriting becomes a practical part of the theatre industry, and the steps taken in putting on new writing.

She then moved to Brown University in Rhode Island, where she studied playwriting under the Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Paula Vogel. She went on to gain a Masters of Fine Art in Playwriting. Whilst at Brown, Gina wrote widely. Her thesis play, *U.S. Drag* was directed by Peter DuBois, and the two stayed in touch, Peter directing the original productions of *Becky Shaw* some ten years later.

Gina was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for *Becky Shaw*, which had its world premiere at the Humana Festival at Actors Theatre of Louisville and its New York premiere Off-Broadway at Second Stage. Gina has received an Obie Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, The Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, an Outer Critics Circle Award, The Helen Merrill Award for Emerging Playwrights, and an American Theatre Critics Association/Steinberg citation.

Gina's writing is often concerned with contemporary American life, dealing with human reactions to national events, and drawing on the tensions inherent in class, culture and politics. Her plays combine broad comedy - often dark or cutting - with sharp, social resonance. Often set in cities, they explore the American psyche and modern sensibilities. In *U.S. Drag*, two young women in Manhattan seek love and happiness. Along the way, they volunteer for a community advocacy group to try to track down a notorious neighbourhood attacker and gain the hefty reward. Their new circle of friends includes a collection of colourful characters from different walks of society, each looking for salvation in the arms of another in a group where no one has very much to give. *After Ashley*, which won an Obie, poked satirical fun at the American media through the transformation of middle class teenager Justin into a national hero; at first lauded, he fast becomes trapped in a media firestorm from which he yearns to escape.

Gionfriddo has lived in Washington, D.C., Providence, Rhode Island and New York City. In addition to writing her own material, she has also taught playwriting at Brown University, Providence College, and Rhode Island College.

Plays include:

**2008** *America's Got Tragedy* (short)

**2008** *Becky Shaw*

**2007** *Squalor* (short)

**2004** *After Ashley*

**2003** *Trepidation Nation*

**2002** *U.S. Drag*

**2001** *Guinevere*

**2000** *Safe* (short)

Dates denote year of first professional production.

*'It seems like one thing we share is a desire to write about contemporary America as we see it... When I see a play, I want my world rocked, my perspective shifted. I get really mad when that doesn't happen.'*

Gina Gionfriddo in conversation with Adam Rapp.  
Brooklyn Rail. 2007.

Writing for television includes: Supervising Producer for HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*; *Law & Order*; *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*; *Cold Case*; *The Borgias*.

**This article is edited from Gina Gionfriddo's Author's Note for *Becky Shaw*, in which she shares some of her beliefs about the play.**

I don't think any character in this play is bad or wrong or crazy or worthless or unlovable. I don't think any of them are damaged beyond repair. I don't think any one character is more to blame than the others for the emotional wreckage that piles up in the second act.

I wish fingers didn't have to be pointed, but - trust me - they will be. In the audience talkbacks I have taken part in after productions of *Becky Shaw*, the one constant I have seen is the zeal to ascribe blame. The good news is that the audiences invariably fail to reach consensus as to which character is most deserving of their contempt. These characters seem to function as screens onto which audience members project old wounds and fierce convictions about how people ought to behave. The best comment I ever got in one of these talkbacks was from a woman who shook her head wistfully at the people arguing around her and opined that the characters were all 'just doing the best they can.'

And I agree. There isn't any character in this play I wouldn't fix up with one of my friends. With some caveats, of course. I might say, 'I have this great person in mind, but here's a thing or two you should know ...' But I would say this about any of my actual real friends in my actual real life. Like Suzanna says, 'First date, everyone's nervous... We all have our thing.' I'm not convinced these characters have significantly more things than your average Janes and Joes.

For whatever reason, I have seen Becky and Andrew take some of the harder beatings in these discussions, so I want to speak specifically to them. In imagining Becky, think of the fallen stars you've known, the people who came out of high school voted most likely to succeed and... didn't. At seventeen, Becky had looks, brains, charm, and a full scholarship to an Ivy League school. Now she is, as Max rightly points out, 'a thirty-five-year-old office temp' with a barren personal life. How did that happen? I think it happened for the reasons Becky gives in the play, and for a few others she doesn't give. I leave the specifics of Becky's slide to the actress who plays her. The point I wish to drive home is that Becky is not a psycho loser but rather a winner who skidded off course and, through accumulated disappointments and failures, lost her moorings.



Haydn Gwynne and David Wilson Barnes in rehearsal  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning



Daisy Haggard, Anna Madeley and Vincent Montuel in rehearsal  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

I have respect for Becky, and I have hope. She has an iron will not to accept her fate - her thin paycheck and monotonous typing-pool poverty. I believe that the woman Max describes at the end of the café scene - bitter, desperate, mercenary - is someone Becky truly does not want to be. It's fine to feel frustrated by Becky, oppressed by her, angry with her. Just keep in mind that she feels these same things about herself. Do I think Max and Becky have a future together? I don't know. But I don't think it's out of the question. If Becky were to work very hard and reclaim that old, good self she alludes to in the café ... Who knows?

Some words on Andrew. The potential pitfall in playing this character is to play the purity and truth of his goodness. I'm not sure I believe anyone is totally good and true, and I certainly don't believe Andrew is. If he seems more straightforward than the other characters, it may be because he's operating under the most self-delusion. He's a serial rescuer who derives self-esteem and maybe even sexual arousal from assuming the savior role in women's lives. He's got a bit of a broken bird fetish. Is this a terrible, wicked thing? I don't think it is. Suzanna isn't wrong to credit Andrew with "healing her." I think every character in this play manipulates other people to get their own needs met, and Andrew is no exception. He will come to understand this about himself in the course of the play, and it's an uncomfortable truth to face. I think the play works best when the actor playing Andrew mines the darker impulses in this very nice guy's character.

I've heard from some of the artists who've worked on the play that they enjoyed knowing what I was chewing on when I sat down to write *Becky Shaw*. I was reading Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* after being intrigued by comments the film director, Mira Nair, made regarding the perils of adapting the book for film in 1994. Also, I was puzzling over the many novels I read in college named after female characters that are (a) destroyers, (b) victims of destruction, or (c) both. Most often, they are both; their terrible reversals wrought by sexual indiscretions and attempts to climb into a higher class. I'm thinking of novels from the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, mostly — books by Richardson, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Hardy, and Dreiser, to name a few. On the dramatic front, I'd throw in Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie. I tried to change the name of this play at one point and my director, Peter DuBois, urged me not to do it. He said that the title *Becky Shaw* felt ominous and perilous for reasons he could not name. He led me to understand that we have a great literary tradition of ruinous and ruined eponymous women that we've internalized without analyzing.

Gina Gionfriddo, February 2010

**Almeida Projects spoke to writer Gina Gionfriddo and director Peter DuBois about their ideas and inspiration for *Becky Shaw*, and their experience working on different productions of the play.**

**Almeida Project:** You have known each other since college and Peter directed one of your early plays whilst you were both still undergraduates. How did you come back into contact again professionally and what's it been like working on *Becky Shaw* together?

**Gina Gionfriddo:** We met in graduate school at Brown University where Peter directed my thesis play, *U.S. Drag*, in 1997. We stayed in touch after that. Peter became the Artistic Director of a theatre in Juneau, Alaska (Perseverance Theatre) and brought me out there to teach. When we did *Becky Shaw* in Louisville, Kentucky, it was really the first time post-Brown that Peter's schedule synched up with my getting a production. It's been a blast working on this play together.

We met through the playwright, Paula Vogel, at Brown, who has a really fearless dark comic vision that we both admire. I enjoy working with Peter because we have a ton of fun, but he keeps the actors and me honest. My plays use comedy to navigate painful truths, and you really need a director who won't just settle for the laughs. Peter creates an atmosphere of comfort such that the actors and I can go to the tougher places.

**Peter DuBois:** I remember when Gina sent me *Becky Shaw*, I was sitting on the Q train going into Manhattan from Brooklyn and I was immediately transported back to our days at Brown. I was laughing so hard on the train that people were looking at me like I'd suddenly lost my mind. I felt a palpable thrill at being back in collaboration with Gina. She has a great gift for shedding light on the darker motivations of human behaviour, with tremendous humour and compassion.

**AP:** What was the process you both went through bringing *Becky Shaw* to the Almeida Theatre?

**PDB:** A good friend of ours, who was a real champion of the play in New York, brought the script to Michael Attenborough. Michael called me and we had a great conversation – he had such wonderful insight into the play and was very enthusiastic. Michael then flew to Boston to see my production there, and I came out here to see the theatre. We hit it off right away, and the theatre speaks for itself really. It is an honour for us to be here.

**AP:** The play skips between various cities in the United States: New York, Boston, Providence and Richmond. How do you think this play translates for a British audience, and have any of the cultural references been changed during rehearsals?

**PDB:** The beginning of most rehearsal processes involves table work – sitting around the table and breaking down multiple aspects of the play: how do the mechanics of the play work? What is motivating each beat, each moment? What is the back-story of each character, etc. Part of that examination is cultural. So the London actors really dove into the American character of the play, the locations, the “types” of people these characters are, from the point of view of geography, class etc. I hope that there is very little that will not translate – but we do have a glossary. I remember watching Alan Ayckbourn's *The Norman Conquests* in New York, which I loved. There were British references that I didn't understand entirely, but could follow based on context. I think a similar dynamic applies here.

**AP:** Gina, in your author's note for the cast you mentioned that you were reading Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* when writing *Becky Shaw*, can you talk us through the relevance of this for you?

**GG:** The initial spark for me was reading an interview with the film director Mira Nair about adapting Thackeray's novel for the American screen. She talked about the way in which Americans find discussions of class unseemly. We're very open, I think, about our sex and our drugs, and comparatively squeamish about discussing our money. Addictions are more readily revealed than, say, credit card debt.



Peter DuBois and Gina Ginofriddo

So I read *Vanity Fair* and I started thinking about someone like Thackeray's Becky turned loose in contemporary America. His Becky Sharp is a woman driven to marry into a higher class. She's an aggressive social climber who doesn't take pains to hide her hunger. Thackeray disapproves of his Becky, calls her a serpent, but you also sense a grudging sense of respect for her determination. Of course, it's one thing for a woman in the age of Thackeray to set about marrying well; it's another for a woman to do it today.

I think we're more uncomfortable with class climbing as a female agenda today because women have, theoretically, so many options to make their own way. And in America, we are very, very attached to our 'American Dream' - the narrative put forth in Horatio Alger's books in the 19th Century in which any child in rags can become rich through hard work. We tend to see poverty as a personal failing.

**AP:** Do either of you empathise with a particular character in *Becky Shaw* and how has the audience reaction to the characters differed?

**PDB:** I try not to judge or take sides with these characters, or to jump to conclusions. I enjoy their contradictions, and shaping the play is about making sure those contradictions are not reconciled or made more logical. As Susan says, 'the heart wants what the heart wants'. And that is an unpredictable thing. Susan is probably the character I'd most like to have a drink with, especially if Lester can join!

**GG:** One of the pleasures of working on this show through multiple productions has been hearing audience members describe who is right and who is wrong. There's such delicious disagreement! I've had people tell me that Becky is a scary manipulator and I've had people tell me that she's a good person used and mistreated by the other characters. It seems to me that audiences bring their own romantic and economic pasts to bear on how they judge the story. Some people give Max enormous credit for the economic caretaking he does, while others overlook this entirely. So it's hard to predict, night-to-night, how the audience's alliances will shape up. I empathize with all of these characters, probably most with Becky because she's trying to make the biggest changes with the slimmest resources.

**AP:** The track list for *Becky Shaw* is quite a contemporary collection of songs, were any of the songs selected for a particular reason?

**GG:** The songs were mostly chosen to keep a feeling or mood alive in the time it took to change a set between scenes. Sometimes we chose pieces that suggested a bit of menace or trouble brewing so that the audience felt permission to go there even though the scenes were comic.

*I Got You, Babe* was a song I chose because hearing it instantly gives me a feeling of cozy childhood comfort, the likes of which Suzanna and Max are recalling in the first scene. *The Sonny and Cher Show* was a variety show in America that I watched at bedtime as a child. Sonny and Cher always sang this song with their little daughter to say goodnight at the end of the show. For Americans of a certain age, the song has a kind of Proustian effect, conjuring a sense of safety and love.

Of the other songs we've used, British audiences may recognize the Joy Division song, *Shadowplay*, covered by The Killers, an American band who I think British audiences have embraced more than their home team. This song, particularly the scream towards the end of 'to the centre of the city in the night waiting for you,' has always struck me as the most exhilarating cry of romantic obsession. It felt right for the moment when romantic interest in the play was tipping towards obsession.

**AP: Gina, how involved have you been as a writer in the rehearsal process, both in the American productions and here at the Almeida?**

**GG:** I am most involved in the first and second productions of a play where the script may be changing, so I was in the room with Peter almost every day in Louisville and New York. After that, I come in if the director thinks it will be useful. I came in for two days toward the end of the Almeida's rehearsal process and answered questions the actors were having. Then I will be returning to watch the show in previews and give Peter any thoughts he might find useful.

**AP: The design for the Almeida's production of *Becky Shaw* involves a complex revolving stage, what were the artistic decisions behind this. How does the staging differ from previous productions of *Becky Shaw*?**

**PDB:** The Almeida is a gorgeously intimate theatre, while the performance space has an epic feel to it. At the same time, quite practically, there is no wing space to store furniture. The play moves quickly from space to space and builds in suspense over time. There are two hotel rooms, a sitting room, two apartments and other public spaces. So how do you create the environment you need but also move the play along? And this is not a play where you want to be looking at stage hands, or watch actors fiddle with furniture. In previous theatres there was significant wing space, so set elements floated in and out of the wings onto the stage, and above from the fly-loft.

The Almeida has a large circular shape, so we created a circular design on a turntable with walls to sub-divide the turntable. This allows us to create off-stage space to set one scene while the other is being played. I also love what Jonathan has done in terms of allowing scenes to bleed seamlessly over and into one another. His use of curtains and flying walls is great. The set helps illuminate character dynamics, and shape the story telling.

**AP: Peter, as the Artistic Director at Huntington Theatre in Boston, you presumably have a certain style of working and running your theatre, what differences have you noticed between Huntington and other American theatres as opposed to working at the Almeida?**

**PDB:** I love it here, and there are certain aspects to the rehearsal process that I will try to bring home with me. You always learn something by working in a new theatre, and this is amplified by being in another country.

I find the length of the rehearsal process here to be more civilized, as it allows for a richer connection to the material and the company. In the States we are often rushing through the process in the rehearsal hall, taking one day off per week, and often working as many as 10 days in a row. The reasons for this are financial. Here there is a longer process (6 weeks versus 3 weeks), which allows for the actors and creative team to have families, and to have a little more down time to digest the characters, think about the story they are telling and to learn the lines. One thing my theatre in Boston and the Almeida share is an amazing staff, which is essential to creating great work – it makes a real difference when you are surrounded by people who are happy to be at work and are proud of what they do.

**AP:** Had either of you visited the Almeida before you started working on this production? What do you feel is special about the theatre or the space?

**GG:** I had not visited the theatre before this production. I'm most struck by how intimate the space feels given how many seats it has.

**PDB:** I agree with Gina, the intimacy and the singular shape of the space were immediately appealing. The walls of the theatre seem to breathe the remarkable history of what has taken place here. I also love the open lightness of the lobby.

It is very welcoming. There is a tangible sense of family here. Some of Gina and my American friends have had plays staged here – Stephen Adly Guirgis, Neil LaBute, Lynn Nottage – it feels good to be part of the family.

**AP:** Gina, what would you like the audience to take away from this production?

**GG:** I never have a particular moral or perspective that I want to sell people on through my plays. I'm happy if the play leads audiences to think about why something as innocent as this date set up went so awry and wreaked so much havoc. It's a play, hopefully, about how we treat our loved ones and the strangers that land on our doorstep.

**AP:** How did you get into doing what you do now?

**GG:** I enjoyed writing scenes as a child, and then got into acting in plays at my high school. I turned to playwriting because I was unsatisfied with the plays and roles available to me as a teenage actor. I think my initial love was writing and the acting was a bit of a side journey that led me back to that. I had the opportunity to go to college in New York City, which enabled me to have an internship at a theatre that produced new plays. I learned an enormous amount from watching those plays change through readings and in the rehearsal processes.

**PDB:** I started directing little scenes I would create in my back yard when I was very young, and I would invite the neighbours to join. My mother had a collection of wigs and I was doing drag before I knew what drag was. My first play was something like *Grandma takes Uncle Eddie to the Supermarket*. I played all the characters. I have always looked to who and what the things are immediately around me that I can make theatre with. Many of my collaborators started out as my friends from school (like Gina!). And I always seek out places where I know I can make my plays, and get the friendship and support doing so. A big part of why I do what I do is because of the people I get to work with.

**AP:** What advice do you have for young people interested in a career as a playwright?

**GG:** Read lots of plays of all different kinds. A teacher once told me that the plays you hate teach you more than the ones you love, so you should be sure to read and see plays of all kinds. I agree with that. It's easy for a writer to get lazy and fall into repeating the kind of writing that comes easy and garners them praise. It's good to shake yourself out of your comfort zone by reading and seeing work you feel you'd never want to write or would never feel able to write. I think reading and seeing a lot of theatre is a necessary education. Writing classes and books about writing were helpful to me in that they pushed me past my own roadblocks and allowed me to see how my writing could go deeper and become more satisfying.

**PDB:** Find the collaborators you like to work with and keep working with them. Also, you are your best producer – don't wait for a theatre to say they will do your play, find a way to get it up yourself.



Director Peter DuBois in rehearsal  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

**Assistant Director Ben Brynmor gives us a unique insight into the rehearsal room, and talks us through the process from page to stage in his week-by-week rehearsal diary.**

### Week One

Almeida rehearsal room, 108 Upper Street. The ‘meet and greet’. Five actors, one director, one designer and myself sit around an island of tables in the middle of the room, ringed by a huge circle of people. Michael Attenborough (the Artistic Director) introduces himself, and one by one the thirty or so people in the circle say their name and what they do. From marketing teams to stage management, development fundraisers to the education department, this first day ritual introduces us to names and job titles that, honestly, go in one ear and out the other. But what does burn an impression is the sense that a whole army of people surrounds us whose invisible graft supports and enables the work that these five actors will embody on stage in a few weeks time. We are welcomed into the hub of their building as Michael explains his reasons for inviting *Becky Shaw* over to the Almeida.

It’s a new American play, and the director too is new to the Almeida, having come with the play from across the Atlantic. His name is Peter DuBois, and he brings with him an actor called David Wilson Barnes. They’ve both done *Becky Shaw* twice already in the States, but it’s Peter’s intention to come at it in London as if for the first time. Symbolically, he’s left all his notes back home, and he picks up a fresh clean copy of the script, free of annotations or director scribbles. Both Peter and David report at the end of the week that what has been thrilling about the process so far has been unpacking the cultural baggage of the play, and, in fact, what it is to be American - a lot of which they’d taken for granted on their home turf as they’d never had need to explain it.

After introductions, we have a read through. Some of the building staff stay in the rehearsal room to listen, and it’s thrilling to hear how laugh out loud funny this play is, just on a first read. Our dialect coach, Penny Dyer, jots down some initial notes before returning at the end of the week for some one-on-one sessions with the English cast members. Then cast, director and I find a café nearby for lunch. It may sound strange, but lunches, coffee breaks, a drink in the pub after rehearsals, these are the places where some of the most important work happens – relaxed conversations that share cultural understanding, build relationships and common reference points, and reflect on the process to offer occasional and accidental insights. For example, Americans tend to open their mouths and start speaking before they’ve finished the thought, unlike a more composed sort of speech over here.

*See, you are why civilisation is going to end. You would choose a disgusting reality over a beautiful fiction. I don’t understand that. I want *The Love Boat*. I do not want a real boat with real lovers*

Max  
Scene One

# In the Rehearsal Room



Haydn Gwynne in rehearsal  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

*Sexuality is like intelligence. We're all born with different endowments. Some people are retarded and eat paint, others split atoms and write symphonies.*

Susan  
Scene Nine

After a slightly longer lunch than usual, a cast that suddenly feel as if they have known each other for ages (none of whom have worked together before) are presented with the model box. Our designer, Jonathan Fensom, talks us through his elegant solution to the challenges of a script that moves swiftly between a series of detailed realistic settings. He plasters the walls with costume drawings that depict the changes of each character through each of the eight scenes. The actors have all week to consult the wall, as we get more and more familiar with the play. On Friday, Jonathan is back to have one-on-one chats with the cast, who by now are more familiar with their characters and the world we are trying to create. As Penny does her dialect work next door, Jonathan and our costume buyer Sarah make notes to go away and assemble a wardrobe rail for each character. Hardly any costume will be made. Because the setting is contemporary American, most of it will be bought.

And then, from Tuesday to Friday, our first week is all about table work – discussing the backstory and biographies of the characters, working slowly through the play, asking questions of it, diagnosing what happens in the time gaps between scenes. I find images of the locations and spaces these characters inhabit (the East Coast corridor between Richmond, Virginia and Boston, Massachusetts), sticking them to the walls, as the world of the play starts to solidify and become real in our minds.

What becomes clear quickly is the calibre of our actors. They use the table well. By which I mean, they take time to absorb the circumstances of the characters, but also to be in the moment with each other as characters in the

scenes we are working on. They take the time to connect, contact and affect each other, each reading becoming more layered with intentions, both conscious and bald, as well as more mysterious and sub-rational. To an outside observer, the pace of the reading is slow and over-laden. But you notice in the looks they exchange how a careful web of associations and relationships is being woven. Our actors are slowly piecing together the puzzle of their characters in all their complexity as three-dimensional human beings.

What has been a joy about week one is the warm, generous and fun atmosphere Peter has enabled. He tells me that there is a time when the play stops being funny for a while, but the continual laughter and comedy of the room shows we haven't got there yet. Next Monday, we'll start to get the play up on its feet!

## Week Two

Week two, and we are up on our feet. Our Stage Management team have taped the dimensions of our set out onto the rehearsal room floor with coloured electrical tape, and the edges of the room are stacked with rehearsal props and furniture. The transition from table work to finding the physical shape of a scene can be a tricky hurdle in a rehearsal process, but Peter allows the actors in Scene One the time to gently and gradually acclimatise to the change in gears involved in moving from talking about the script to sketching out its physical life up on our feet. We spend the week slowly working through the play, scene by scene, actors holding scripts in one hand whilst we feel our way towards an approximate physical shape. The decisions are dictated by the geography of the set – where the entrances and exits are, and the practical necessities of moving from one scene to another - but the actors are also discovering ways to illustrate the actions and psychology of the characters that we discussed last week in tangible form. In the hotel room in Scene One, Anna discovers that her character, Suzanna, relates to her bed as a place of safety – constructing a nest out of the pillows. It is her space to indulge her grieving, and to retreat from the world.

Peter likes to work in layers, and we will revisit each scene at least three times before we attempt a stumble through of the play, probably next week. As we find the way the play dances through the space, we are continually developing and adding texture to the foundation of week one's work. The actors thread together the logic of thoughts and ideas in the text, running larger sections of dialogue together to plot



Anna Madeley in rehearsal  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

*Were you waiting for me to walk through the door? This isn't Jane Austen's England, Susie. You could've walked through it, too.*

Max  
Scene Four

# In the Rehearsal Room



David Wilson Barnes in rehearsal  
Photo: Simon Annand

*I look at her and I think... She's like blood on the snow. Her sadness is wrong, and I want to fix it.*

Andrew  
Act Five

the development of arguments, and this new stage of work keeps on revealing new insights into character. In the process of creating the life of scene one in the New York hotel room, David discovers that his character (Max) is incredibly patient – constantly appeasing the conflict between two other characters, and stage managing events to achieve his long term goals. By the end of the week, we've worked through the whole play once, painting the broad brush strokes of its staging. We now have a physical template for the whole show, and Peter asks the cast to use the weekend to get off book, committing the dialogue to memory now that we've explored it once through in the space.

Assisting Peter, I'm also appreciating how much of a director's time is spent in discussion with production teams and marketing staff, as we munch on sandwiches over lunchtime meetings about the show. It seems that everyone in the building wants to grab some time with the director, to discuss publicity strategies, to check on the fabric the designer is choosing for a sofa, or to confirm the rehearsal schedule over Christmas, down to discussing the licensing regulations over the music we want to use in the show. In fact, we devote most of our Wednesday afternoon rehearsal to the marketing department, who bring someone in to shoot a trailer for the show.

## Week Three

After a nice two day weekend full of laundry, cooking, filling out dreaded tax returns, and learning lines, the actors regroup to begin week three's work. We comb through the play again from beginning to end, filling out another layer, testing the initial decisions of last week and finding more detail and nuance in the blocking of each scene.

The actors hands are suddenly freed up, with the occasional prompt from the DSM (deputy stage manager, who sits in on rehearsals) or myself, and as a consequence new props keep finding their way into the scenes. Our DSM, Erin, is our key point of contact between the rehearsal room and the outside production team. She organises the room, prepares the space before scene work and run thoughts, marks cues and blocking in her prompt book ready to cue the show when we get into performance, and notes any new items or important decisions to come out of rehearsal. Laptops, cell phones, even the specific dimensions of the armrests on a chair – our DSM has been fielding requests and organising stand in props for rehearsal. In fact, it's quite a food-heavy show, so Erin and the stage management team have been mocking up hot dogs from bananas (the healthy way



to rehearse) and tracking the movements of liquid and wine glasses in the rather complicated quaffing sequence of Scene Two. This week feels more technical, as we aim for cleanness and precision.

It's wonderful to watch David Wilson Barnes, with his effortless American throwaway delivery, display a mastery with physical props that seems typically American to me. From the outset, he is using personal items like his Blackberry and his laptop to tap out the emotional tempo of his character in key moments. These material appendages become extensions of his physical self, used as tools of evasion, or registering the shift in his character's rhythms.

This branch of work continues as we call in movement director Arthur Pita for a session with one of our actresses, Haydn. She is playing a character with multiple sclerosis who uses a stick for mobility. Arthur is here to help with the accuracy of Haydn's physicality, as well as ensuring that she isn't doing any damage to her own body as a performer. But his first question is: 'What sort of a character is she?' Haydn is playing a powerful woman with strong opinions, who dominates the scenes she appears in; a woman who is who she is despite her illness. That's the contradiction that Gina has written into the character, and it's what Haydn and our movement director are interested in using the physicality to highlight. The way the character wields the cane, as a tool to punctuate her epigrammatic utterance and illustrate power, becomes key to Haydn's characterisation this week, as does the way she chooses to position herself when seated – it becomes a statement of her sexuality, staging herself as the elegant

Vincent Montuel and Daisy Haggard in rehearsal

Photo: Hugo Glendinning

*Be careful chasing after goodness. Goodness and incompetence too often go hand in hand in men.*

Susan  
Scene Nine

# In the Rehearsal Room



Haydn Gwynne in rehearsal  
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

*You may have been victimised in your life; you may be a complete con artist. I don't know. My sense is you fall somewhere in the middle. Truth or con... It's unattractive.*

Susan  
Scene Nine

middle aged mother who happens to have rediscovered her body via a lover the same age as her daughter.

Again, it's a case of a prop becoming an extension of the character's physical life, and it's this sort of texturing that occupies the bulk of week three, as the textual work percolates up into the physical playing of the scenes.

## Weeks Four/Five

*Becky Shaw's* rehearsal period straddles Christmas and New Year, so this week of work occupies the bookends around Christmas Day, working Monday to Wednesday the week before and the Wednesday to the Friday (New Year's Eve) the following week. One of the challenges is planning the schedule so as to maximise the utility of these shortened weeks whilst allowing space to start the engine running on the work again after five or six days away from the process.

Before Christmas, we finish working through the play for the third time, refining the arc of the character journeys now that the actors are familiar with their character's progress through the piece as a whole. After having spent so much time working in close-up on the scenes in isolation, retreating back to see the piece through a wide-focus lens starts to give us a sense of the characteristics that underpin the characters throughout the play. Max and Susan spend a lot of time in action, taking control of situations and arguments. Suzanna and Becky, on the other hand, discover common ground in terms of their self-presentation as characters who float, untethered, like a leaf, buffeted from event to event throughout the play. Part of Suzanna's journey is learning how to take control, how to be 'the decider'.

Our writer, Gina Gionfriddo, finally manages to make it to London after battling the extreme weather conditions in New York and snow-closed airports this side of the Atlantic. She joins us in rehearsals for Wednesday and Thursday after Christmas, and we use the time to work through the play, an act a day, stumbling through each scene and inviting Gina to make any comments, and answer any questions that the actors have in terms of specific thoughts behind lines, holes in the back-stories or immediate circumstances around scenes.

It's a fantastic boost to the room to have another fresh pair of eyes watching the work, and offering a new angle on some choices and previous discussions. Gina doesn't impose anything. What she is brilliant at is illuminating the psychology lying behind the choices of the characters in certain scenes. These thoughts deepen the three-dimensionality of the people that Gina has written. She offers to the actress playing Becky: 'People who spend a lot of time alone without any feedback become obsessed

over their presentation. They start to rehearse themselves'. Gina also describes how her characters constantly measure the reality of their interactions with others against what they thought, wished, or fantasised might happen before they went into a scene. Hence a lot of Becky's energy is directed into dealing with how the conversations she tries to have with people don't go the way that she foresaw. It's a really useful observation that keeps the scenes active, and keeps the actors listening acutely to each other, constantly reading and reacting to each other, moment-by-moment.

After waving goodbye to Gina (who will be back for previews) we use the Friday morning of New Year's Eve to do our first run through, to consolidate the work that we've done so far, and to give the actors the measure of where we need to go next. Because of the bank holiday, we've got another long weekend before we're back in rehearsal next week. Peter invites the actors to use this first run of the play in its entirety to thread together the journey that their characters go through over the course of a two and a quarter hour performance. The actors give a really wonderful account of our work in progress, and we finish with some notes from Penny on accent, a few general notes from Peter, and a glass of bubbly to celebrate the New Year. Spirits are high!

## Week Six

2011! And as I wake up on 4 January, I receive a phone call from Peter. He's sick. Food poisoning. So I'm up. It's a funny role, the assistant director. Every project you work on, you have to renegotiate what your role is with the director, enjoying the opportunity to learn from them at the same time as supporting their vision and process. Then you get these moments where suddenly something happens and it's your turn to run a room. It's such a treat to get to do this at the Almeida, where you're so well supported and you can use the opportunity to briefly exercise your own directorial voice with such talented actors.

I use the day to get the motor running for our last week in the rehearsal room, working through the play from beginning to end with a technical head on, ironing out any problems or questions around blocking that came up during the run and being hot on getting Gina's script word perfect. I think the actors appreciate having a day where they can think about the play in practical terms, steering clear of the big acting notes and polishing the technical aspects of their performances ready for a week of run-throughs.

With a rejuvenated director back at the wheel, the rest of the week is a combination of run-throughs, and working notes. During these working notes, we spotlight small sections of the play and work in detail on adjustments as a result of notes from the run-throughs. The actors are working for the flow of their journeys, and relax into the structure of the play, whilst Peter sharpens the detail, working on the high definition of the performances. We also go back to the script in some of these working notes sessions, and re-discover things like ellipses and full stops that had got lost in the move from page to stage, which have huge consequences in terms of playing choices and the rhythmic flow of the beats.

Another layer is built into the performances when we have our first audience. A crew of about 15 or so people turn up to see a run on Thursday – these are people from the theatre who benefit from seeing the show in advance – box office staff who have to describe it, marketing and development staff, but also stage managers, our lighting and sound designer etc. The layer that comes into play for the actors is dealing with laughs from the audience. It's a technical aspect of the playing that requires them to tune into when to drive through a laugh, and also teaches them how to handle the structures of the beats and jokes as Gina writes them. At the end of it, Peter concludes that British audiences seem much more intelligent! He qualifies this by saying that the British ear seems more prepared to invest in jokes with a longer build, lighter on the laughter in the instant impact one-liners, but more attuned in tracking complexities and intricacies of the less overt humour. It's an intriguing comparison...What will be fascinating is how consistent the response will be, or whether it's a show whose audience can react differently every night. Next week, out of the rehearsal room, into the theatre!

**Becky Shaw, and its eponymous heroine, draws on a history of literature featuring female protagonists, with social ambition and marriage as the ultimate goals. Becky Sharpe, in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, is one of the most obvious parallels and strongest influences on Gionfriddo's writing. Becky Shaw can be seen as a modern-day Becky Sharpe.**

Vanity Fair takes place against a backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars. It concerns the lives of two girls, each a stark contrast to the other. Becky Sharp is an orphan, poor but ingenious and beguiling; Amelia Sedley is daughter of a rich City merchant, sheltered and naïve. The two girls meet at Miss Pinkerton's Academy for Young Ladies, Becky driven by social ambition and Amelia by a delicate heart.

Becky Sharp's desire to move up in society initiate much of the action of the plot, beginning in earnest with her to attempt to marry Amelia's brother Jos Sedley, who may be rich but is also dim. She finds her way into the wealthy Crawley household, as a governess, and marries Rawdon, the second son of Sir Pitt Crawley – whose proposal she had already turned down. Rawdon is a self-indulgent and ignorant man, and Becky soon moves on further to become mistress of Lord Steyne, eventually finding her place in society almost by chance.

Amelia Sedley's story by contrast lacks somewhat in interest; Amelia marries Osborne, a husband both inept and dull; and her second love Dobbin is again bland, despite his strong morals. It is Becky who gains and sustains the reader's attention, with Amelia serving to highlight Becky's intrigue and ambitious qualities.

Named after the fair set up by Beelzebub in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the novel takes place during the Napoleonic wars. Thackeray's novel, with its scathing depiction of the upper classes in the early 19th Century, is relentlessly cynical and disparaging; however the universal hopelessness and dislikeable nature of its characters, each struggling with loveless relationships, makes for entertaining reading as a satire of the socially ambitious.

*Becky Shaw* is equally graphic in its depiction of characters' hopeless relationships and the social pressures inherent in their ambitions. However, set in 21st Century America, social context is vastly more complex, as gender and class distinctions have blurred to form a new rule book by which its characters must abide.

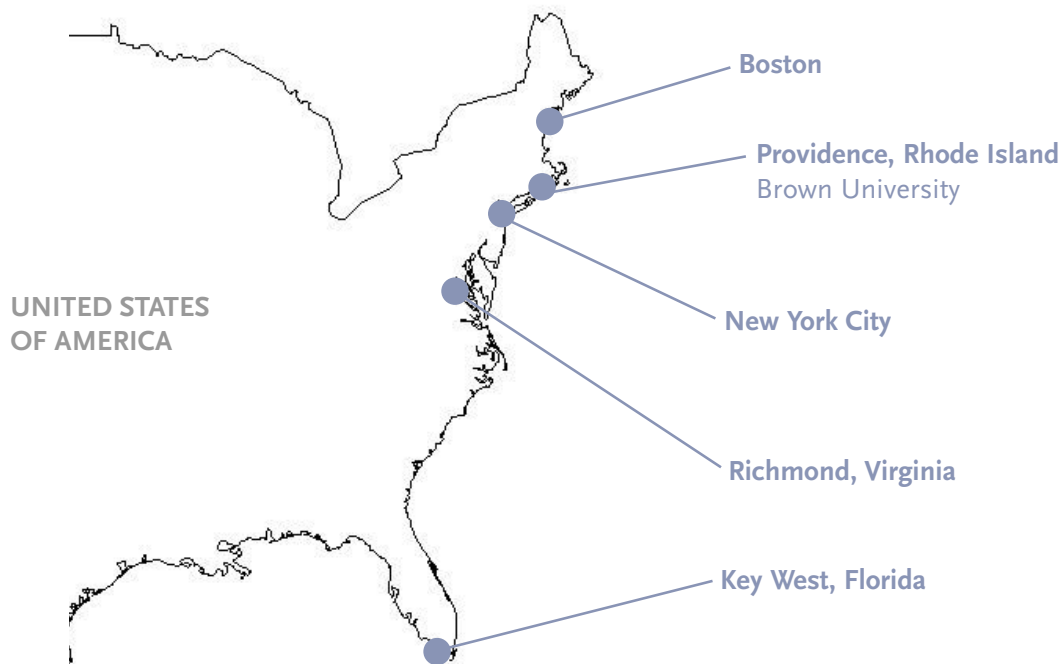
***'This I set down as a positive truth. A woman with fair opportunities, and without a positive hump, may marry whom she likes.'***

William Makepeace Thackeray  
*Vanity Fair*

## Becky's Eponymous Ancestors in 18th, 19th, early 20th Century Literature

- 1722 *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Dafoe
- 1724 *Roxanna* by Daniel Dafoe
- 1740 *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson
- 1748 *Shamela* by Henry Fielding)
- 1748 *Clarissa* by Samuel Richardson
- 1748 *Fanny Hill* by John Cleland
- 1787 *Justine* by the Marquis de Sade
- 1815 *Emma* by Jane Austen
- 1847-8 ***Vanity Fair ('Becky Sharp')*** by W.M. Thackeray
- 1847 *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë
- 1857 *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert
- 1877 *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy
- 1878 *Daisy Miller* by Henry James
- 1880 *Nana* by Émile Zola
- 1888 *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg
- 1890 *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen
- 1891 *Tess of the d'Urbevilles* by Thomas Hardy
- 1893 *Maggie, Girl of the Streets* by Stephen Crane
- 1900 *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser
- 1911 *Jenny Gerhardt* by Theodore Dreiser
- 1925 *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf
- 1930 *Rebecca* by Daphne DuMaurier
- 1955 *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov

**Becky Shaw** moves between a number of locations and references many other places. These are mapped out below, along with some background information behind the cities in which the action of the play is located.



## Boston

Boston is the state capital of Massachusetts, the largest city in New England and another of the oldest cities in the United States. Of the New England area, the city has the most major impact on its culture and economy.

The city has a rich history that attracts many visitors and tourists: it was founded in 1630 by Puritan colonists from England, and was the location of some of the major events of the American Revolution, including the Boston Tea Party; later a number of major early battles of the American Civil War took place in the city. Since Independence, the city has become a major shipping port and centre for manufacturing. It is a leading world finance and business centre, ranked 14th highest in the world, driven by its status as an international centre for higher education and medicine. The city's economy based research, electronics, engineering, finance, and high technology – most significantly biotechnology. In recent years the city has seen much gentrification and its living costs are now among the highest of the United States.

## Key West, Florida

Key West is a city in Florida and the southernmost city in the Continental United States. The city enjoys reliably good weather and warm temperatures all year and consequently has a reputation for its high level of domestic and international tourism, particularly with older people and families; Key West is a destination for many cruise ships and has a large number of guesthouses and hotels.

## New York City

New York City is the most densely populated city in the United States, part of the state of New York. In 2009 the population was estimated to be approaching 8.4 million. The city is a diverse metropolis with five boroughs: Brooklyn, The Bronx, Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island. It is centre for



Providence, Rhode Island

international business, finance, culture, entertainment and education, as well as host of the United Nations Headquarters.

New York was founded by Dutch settlers in 1624, first called New Amsterdam. The name was changed to New York when the colony came under English control in 1664. The city grew from what was initially established as a commercial trading post, due to its opportune location on a large natural harbour on the Atlantic coast. New York was capital of the United States for a brief five years between 1785 and 1790. The city has seen much immigration throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries and it remains one of the most linguistically diverse cities in the world, with over 800 languages spoken.

### Providence, Rhode Island

Providence is the capital of Rhode Island state, the smallest of the United States. It was one of the first cities established in the nation and is now one of the largest cities in the New England region. The city has a reputation for erratic street mapping and a constantly shifting demographic.

Rhode Island American's distinctive accent is 'non-rhotic' (only pronouncing the 'r' sound in a word if it is followed by a vowel sound in the same phrase), and compared to the Brooklyn accent of New York or that of New Jersey – distinguishing the aw sound (so 'coffee' is pronounced 'KAW-fee'). This type of accent originates from the early settlers from eastern England in the Puritan migration to New England in the mid-seventeenth century.

Providence was founded in 1636 and named the area in honor of 'God's merciful Providence' by settler Roger Williams, as he believed this providence to be responsible for revealing such a haven in which to settle. Providence was one of the first cities in the United States to industrialise and was known for its silverware and jewellery production, earning the nickname the 'Beehive of Industry'. Today, the city's economy is largely founded in the service industries, with reputedly the most restaurants and coffee shops per capita of any city in the country.

Providence's minority presence has increased significantly in the last twenty years, particularly with growth in the Hispanic as well as Portuguese-speaking, Black and Asian communities; together, they comprise just under 60% of the city's total population. In 2010, the city elected its first Latino mayor, Dominican-American, Angel Tavares.

Providence has, since 2009, been working to rebrand itself as the 'Creative Capital', drawing on the strength of its artistic community and educational resources. Previously it was known as 'The Renaissance City', although its poverty rate in 2000 was still among the ten highest for cities with a population over 100,000 and a per capita income well below that of the national average.

Providence is home to a number of noted theatre companies and performing arts centres, with a large creative community. It is also the location of the prestigious Brown University, an Ivy League university.

### Brown University

Brown University, located in Providence, Rhode Island is an Ivy League university and the seventh oldest institution of higher education in the United States. It was founded in 1764, prior to the American Independence from the British Empire. Its campus retains many buildings from its 18th Century period.



Brown University

Brown was the first university in the United States to accept students regardless of religious affiliation. Whilst Brown is a relatively small institution, it has a reputation as a research university; it has the oldest undergraduate engineering programme in the Ivy League and the majority of its students study in the areas of Social Sciences, Humanities, Life Science and Physical Science.

### Richmond, Virginia

Richmond is the state capital of Virginia, although it is only the state's third largest in terms of population; it is, as is the case with all cities in Virginia, independent and not part of any county. It is a town steeped in the turbulent history of the United States, and the location of many significant events during the American Revolution and the American Civil War.



Richmond, Virginia, during the American Civil War

The site that Richmond now occupies, at the fall line of the James River, was briefly settled by English settlers from Jamestown in 1609, and again in 1610 for a longer period, near the site of a large native settlement. The present city of Richmond was founded in 1737 and became the capital of what was then Virginia in 1780. During the American Civil War, Richmond served as the capital of the Confederate States of America, and the city retains many important American Civil War landmarks including the The White House of the Confederacy.

Richmond's economy is primarily driven by law, finance and government and the city is home to several notable legal and banking firms, alongside centres for local and national governmental agencies. Tourism also plays a significant role in the economy, with many visitors seeking out Civil War landmarks located nearby. The city has a sizeable arts community, with many museums and a bustling cultural scene including several theatres, and renowned music and ballet companies.

**In *Becky Shaw*, class is a powerful catalyst of the storyline, underpinning the action of the play and the interaction of its characters, particularly behind Becky's desire to improve her life – the same social ambition that Becky Sharp of *Vanity Fair* had in 19th Century England. However, class in America has always been a complex concern with its own history of settlement and enterprise.**

At its most basic, class serves to help society organise itself. Classes are groups of people of similar economic and social position; people who, for that reason, may share political attitudes, lifestyles, consumption patterns, cultural interests and opportunities to get ahead. The idea of class has been recorded since the Roman period. When societies were simpler, the class landscape was easier to read. Karl Marx divided 19th-century societies into just two classes; Max Weber added more. But as societies and economies grew increasingly complex, the old classes – lower, middle, upper – became muddled and common boundaries blurred. A few sociologists go so far as to say that social complexity has made the concept of class meaningless.

Social class certainly exists in the United States, though it remains a complex concept with many competing definitions. The basic three-class model based on rich, middle class and poor is still widely accepted, although there are multiple subdivisions and membership of any class is subject to a complex combination of factors. Most definitions of class structure group people according to wealth, income, education, type of occupation, and membership in a specific subculture or social network. However, some academics consider American society sociologically and economically fragmented in such a manner that no clear class distinctions can be made.

Today, the country has gone a long way toward an appearance of classlessness. Social diversity and the growth of material wealth has erased many of the old markers – clothes, housing, what people own. However, over the past three decades, class has come to play a greater role in important ways. Success in the education system remains linked tightly to class, as does access to healthcare; the rich-poor divide is growing at a rapid rate driven by large-scale racial integration and the rise of super-capitalism. Whilst the American Dream is the ultimate social mobility fantasy, ideologically removing the class barrier and implying equality of opportunity, recent sociological research suggests that this mobility, which once buoyed the American workforce as it rose after World War II, is actually less prevalent in real life than it ever has been.

Dennis Gilbert, William Thompson and Joseph Hickey have all explored America's social structure and propose systems with six distinct social classes; Leonard Beeghlev proposes five, along a similar structure but with a stronger distinction in the upper echelons between the 'rich' and the 'super rich'. These class models feature an upper (or capitalist) class consisting of the rich and powerful, an upper middle class consisting of highly-educated and wealthy professionals, a middle class consisting of college-educated individuals employed in white collar industries, a lower middle class, a working class constituted by clerical and blue collar workers whose work is highly routinised, and a lower class divided between the working poor and the unemployed underclass. In each case, profession (and therein earning potential) is a key factor in determining where a person fits. Other more qualitative factors, such as education, culture, and social status are harder to correlate to income. However, as Dennis Gilbert asserted in *The American Class Structure* (1998), that qualitative factors inevitable correspond to profession in a capitalist society: 'in reality...there is only a limited number of types of occupations... People in similar positions...grow similar in their thinking and lifestyle...they form a pattern, and this pattern creates social class.'

Social class is the term used to demonstrate how members of a society define each other within continuum of positions varying in importance, influence, prestige and compensation. These models rely on some occupations being considered to be desirable, while others are considered to be menial and unpleasant. Generally, the higher the ranking on such a scale, the higher the skill and education levels required to perform it. Social class in *Becky Shaw* is very apparent: Suzanna's automatic disdain for Andrew's job in a coffee shop, and Becky's inferior position as an office temp, compared to Max's higher status as a major earner - this contrast defines their relationships and interaction as characters.

This table outlines the three most prominent current academic American class models:

Dennis Gilbert, 2002		William Thompson and Joseph Hickey, 2005		Leonard Beeghlev, 2004	
Class	Typical Characteristics	Class	Typical Characteristics	Class	Typical Characteristics
<b>Capitalist Class (1%)</b>	Top-level executives, high-rung politicians, heirs. Ivy League education common.	<b>Upper Class (1%)</b>	Top-level executives, celebrities, heirs; income of \$500,000+ common. Ivy league education common	<b>The Super-Rich (0.9%)</b>	Multi-millionaires, incomes often over \$350,000; celebrities and powerful executives/politicians. Ivy League education common.
<b>Upper Middle Class (15%)</b>	Highly educated (often with graduate degrees), most commonly salaried, professionals and middle management with large work autonomy.	<b>Upper Middle Class (15%)</b>	Highly educated (often with graduate degrees) professionals & managers with household incomes from the high 5-figure range to commonly above \$100,000	<b>The Rich (5%)</b>	Households with net worth of \$1 million or more; largely in the form of home equity. Generally have college degrees.
<b>Lower Middle Class (30%)</b>	Semi-professionals and craftsmen with a roughly average standard of living. Most have some college education and are white collar.	<b>Lower Middle Class (32%)</b>	Semi-professionals and craftsman with some work autonomy; household incomes commonly range from \$35,000 to \$75,000. Typically, some college education.	<b>Middle Class (46%)</b>	College educated workers with incomes considerably above-average incomes and compensation; a man making \$57,000 and a woman making \$40,000 may be typical.
<b>Working Class (30%)</b>	Clerical and most blue collar workers whose work is routinised. Standard of living varies depending on number of income earners, but is commonly just adequate. High school education.	<b>Working class (32%)</b>	Clerical, pink and blue collar workers with often low job security; common household incomes range from \$16,000 to \$30,000. High school education.		
<b>Working Poor (13%)</b>	Service, low-rung clerical and some blue collar workers. High economic insecurity and risk of poverty. Some high school education.	<b>Lower Class (14-20%)</b>	Those who occupy poorly-paid positions or rely on government transfers. Some high school education.	<b>Working Class (40-45%)</b>	Blue collar workers and those whose jobs are highly routinized with low economic security; a man making \$40,000 and a woman making \$26,000 may be typical. High school education.
<b>Underclass (12%)</b>	Those with limited or no participation in the labor force. Reliant on government transfers. Some high school education.				

References: Gilbert, D. *The American Class Structure: In An Age of Growing Inequality*, 2002; Thompson, W. & Hickey, J. *Society in Focus*, 2005; Beeghley, L. *The Structure of Social Stratification in the United States*. 2004. Source: Wikipedia

# Social Class in America

# Multiple Sclerosis

Since it was first identified in 1868, by French neurologist Charcot, Multiple Sclerosis, or MS as it is commonly known, has been the subject of intense, world-wide research but still its cause and cure remain elusive. In *Becky Shaw*, Suzanna has been suffering from MS for many years, having been diagnosed with the condition when Suzanna and Max were children.

MS is a medical puzzle that is still yet to be completely understood, but basically, the disease affects the central nervous system and causes interference with nerve impulses in the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves. A simple explanation is conveyed by the term itself: *Sclerosis* is a Greek word meaning, 'hardened tissue or scars'; *multiple* means many. MS causes multiple scars to appear in the central nervous system as a result of the breakdown of the insulating material that covers the nerve fibres, myelin. In varying degrees, these scars result in impairment of motor, sensory and cognitive functions.

The causes of MS are unknown, but research suggests that a combination of genetic and environmental factors may play a role in its development. It is not directly inherited and, unlike some conditions, there is no single gene that causes it. It is possible that a combination of genes make some people more susceptible to developing MS; however, these genes are also common in the general population.

MS is more common in areas further away from the equator. It is not clear why, but it is possible that something in the environment, perhaps bacteria or a virus, plays a role. No single virus has been identified as contributing to MS, but some researchers think that a common childhood virus may act as a trigger, although this theory remains unproven.



*Duet for One*, at the Almeida Theatre in 2008, featured Juliet Stephenson playing Stephanie, a violinist whose career was cut short due to suffering from MS. The play, by Tom Kempinski, was inspired by the story of Jacqueline du Pre.  
Photo: John Haynes

Of the various types of MS, Relapsing Remitting MS is the most common initial diagnosis of MS. Most people are first diagnosed with this type of MS. They experience a flare up or 'relapse' of symptoms followed by a remission. Relapses usually take a few days to develop and can last for days, weeks or months, varying from mild to severe. In the early stages symptoms can disappear completely during remissions. However, after several relapses there may be some residual damage to the myelin, resulting in only a partial recovery. Most people who start out with relapsing remitting MS later develop a form that is known as Secondary Progressive MS. In this form of the disease symptoms do not go away completely after a relapse and there is a steady increase in disability. On average, 65 per cent of people with relapsing remitting MS later develop secondary progressive MS, the form of the disease which Susan is assumed to now have in *Becky Shaw*.

Symptoms of MS include fatigue, balance problems and vertigo, walking and co-ordination difficulties, problems with vision and speech, numbness or tingling, loss of muscle strength and dexterity, stiffness and spasms, anxiety, depression or mood swings,

difficulty with memory and concentration, speech problems, incontinence, and sexual problems. Studies have suggested that clinical depression is more frequent among people with MS than it is in the general population and even more common than among persons with other chronic, disabling conditions.

In *Becky Shaw*, a number of themes and issues emerge which are may be of interest for debates and discussion in the classroom or after the show. A number are listed here as some starting points.

## Generations

In *Becky Shaw*, Susan is of an older generation compared to the rest of the characters we see. She comes from a previous age with different attitudes to the younger characters, that we see in her children. Whilst Suzanna, Max and Andrew in their own way each represent the values of the modern age. Think about the different generations represented in the play. The Baby Boomers (in Susan and Richard), children of the hippy movement, many of whom rebelled against their parents' liberalism and took corporate jobs; the introduction of the pill and the summer of love. Generation X (in Suzanna, Max and Andrew), born in the late 70s and early 80s, defined by independence, free will, rebellion from previous social norms, self-centredness (as opposed to socially obligated); children of a capitalist age; the demise of marriage and traditional values.

**DISCUSS:** *If play were moved forward 20 years, what might the generation gap look like? Or if the play was moved back 100 years?*

*Your generation is fixated on 'intimacy'. That's why your marriages don't last. You think marriage and family require absolute honesty. They do not.*

Susan Scene Nine

## Marriage

Two ideas about marriage emerge in the play:

1. *Marriage as a business arrangement between two people*
2. *Marriage as an expression of true love and emotional commitment.*

The issues around marriage, why we still get married and what it involves, in an age of altered attitudes to romance are very apparent throughout the play. Becky wants to settle down and share long-term commitment. Suzanna has married Andrew after a very short courtship and their marriage is already in trouble, with Suzanna doubting that Andrew is the man for her and questioning his commitment in relation to his relationship with Becky. In the final scene, Susan and Suzanna have a conversation about what is necessary to sustain a marriage, where Suzanna expresses some doubts about Andrew and trust. Susan counters this by stating that marriage does not require complete openness and honesty – in fact it is better to have some pockets of mystery, and not know everything about your partner. She says, 'your generation has an overwhelming need for intimacy. This she believes is not the key to sustaining a relationship – which is a contract of agreement between two people that transcends love alone.

The younger generation of Suzanna, Max and Andrew take a more idealised view of marriage which is interesting to consider when viewed alongside the increased rates of divorce which still persist. Max in particular is an example of a person who avoids commitment because if his partner is not perfect he is put off – he has ideals that no woman can match. The idea of Generation X being unable to compromise their ideals reflects on an altered view of the necessity for long-term commitment, and potentially complicates the essence of what marriage stood for in previous generations, namely a business arrangement of mutual benefit to both parties.

**DISCUSS:** *Which of the two models of marriage above do you think are most strongly promoted in Becky Shaw? What do the characters learn about marriage from their parents?*

## Love

Hollywood sells us a fairy story ideal of love, where the ugly girl can win the handsome prince. America has a rich heritage of associating love with the American Dream through its cultural output. Bad women do not do well and bad man will often win the love of a beautiful woman whilst they are still bad before realising their potential for goodness.

*Love is a happy by-product of use*

Max Scene One

By contrast, the world of *Vanity Fair* and the English novels of the 19th Century, particularly Jane Austen's writing, present love in quite a different way – as something that is not wild and strong but place value on the quiet, loyal commitment to another person. Love is not important to marriage, but respect and good treatment is – so the actions of love rather than the emotions which drive feeling it. In *Becky Shaw*, contrast the relationships of Andrew and Suzanna (with their whirlwind romance) with that of Susan and Richard.

**DISCUSS:** *How do Susan, Suzanna, Andrew and Max differ in their definition of love? Find examples of how this is expressed. Think about popular cultural depictions of love. Other than popular culture, what might influence how we define love?*

## Death

Grief and mourning are central to the play, and every character has had to deal with it in some way, and each person's approach is different. For example, Susan believes that everyone should be prepared for the death of a parent as inevitable, whereas Suzanna feels an unbearable loss and mourns for a long time. Think about the following other examples: Max's recollection of his mother's funeral; Susan and Richard's treatment of Max's father after the funeral; Susan's pragmatic attitude to the death of her husband; Suzanna's grief about the death of her father and Andrew's marking of anniversaries – remembering.

*I am grieving my father's death. My mother brought a... a man with her. To a meeting about the estate. That is so insulting to my father.*

Suzanna Scene One

**DISCUSS:** *Why do you think Suzanna remains 'in mourning' for so long? Do you think her grief is purely down to her father's death or are there other factors at play? Why?*

## Children vs. Adults

Consider how Suzanna behaves when she is around her mother compared to being around Max or Andrew. Suzanna with her mother very much takes on the role of child (victim, wronged), whereas with Andrew she is often more the mother figure, in charge and authoritative. This is played out particularly strongly in the first scene, where Suzanna's childlike use of the simplistic first person (I want, I like, I don't want). Each adult in the play has to come to terms with their long-term future as adults carving out their own paths in life. The death of a parent is influential in making Suzanna (and to a lesser extent, Max), redefine themselves as adults. Susan, by contrast, may be seen as acting 'childishly', with her brushing away of her financial concerns and the taking of a younger lover.

**DISCUSS:** *Who is more childish in the play between Susan or Suzanna? And Max or Andrew? Why?*

## Animal Instincts

There are certain elements of tribalism that we witness in *Becky Shaw*, particularly Suzanna and Max's reaction to Becky as an 'outsider' - and Max's similar reaction to Andrew. The play also draws on the human need to mate and pair up: in their mid-30s, Suzanna, Max, Becky and Andrew are seeking a mate. The idea of the 'body clock', the biological timescale on mating, is at play, which we feel particularly strongly in Becky's desperation to create a home. There is also the animalistic attitude towards sex: 'Sex makes men territorial' as Max says to Suzanna in Scene Four.

**DISCUSS:** *Who are the most territorial characters in Becky Shaw? Who displays animalistic behaviour?*

**Other Themes include:** Gender lines (what women do, what men do - in jobs, at home; their value in relation to one another – in a relationship); age - 30s being the new 20s - people getting married and settling down later, the desperate woman, society's view of each gender dating younger people; idealism versus reality - therapy culture, the desire to be 'perfect'.

**Becky Shaw** deals with a number of issues that are particularly interesting to explore in the classroom, particularly the ideas of family secrets, manipulation and status. Below are just a few suggested exercises for use in lesson time to investigate the styles and themes of the play in further depth.

## Exercise 1: Secrets

In the play it is suggested that Richard, Suzanna's father and Susan's husband, was secretly homosexual – something which the other characters suspected. There are a huge number of secrets in the play: that Richard bought Max from his father; Max keeps secret from Suzanna that he was robbed at gunpoint and slept with Becky; Lester keeps it secret from Susan that he has used the money that he was meant to spend on clearing his credit cards on film equipment - and more. Susan suggests that some secrets are good to keep.

**Duration:** 15 minutes

**Aim:** To introduce students to the idea of dramatic tension inherent in keeping secrets and the effect on the audience.

**Discussion:** How might secrets be revealed - or discovered? What kind of secrets are common in families? Can keeping secrets always be a bad thing? What do you think the effect on an audience might be, of revealing knowledge of a kept secret?

**Practical Exercise:** Split into groups of four. Ask students to create a short improvisation of a family coming together after the death of a family member. One person has discovered something that they think is a secret about the person who has died and they think that they are the only person who knows. The secret must come out and we see how the other family members respond. Give groups 5-10 minutes to come up with a short, improvised scene, before sharing back.

**Evaluate:** Did students want to defend or criticise the person who is dead? What does it feel like to keep a secret from someone you are close to? What was the status in the scene and how did it shift? What is the relationship between secrets and power? Discuss the idea of open secrets, where people know things but they are never discussed.

**Watching the Play:** Think about how the characters use secrets: to threaten others, to strengthen bonds, to shock, to test people. How might things go differently if the characters in *Becky Shaw* were more open?

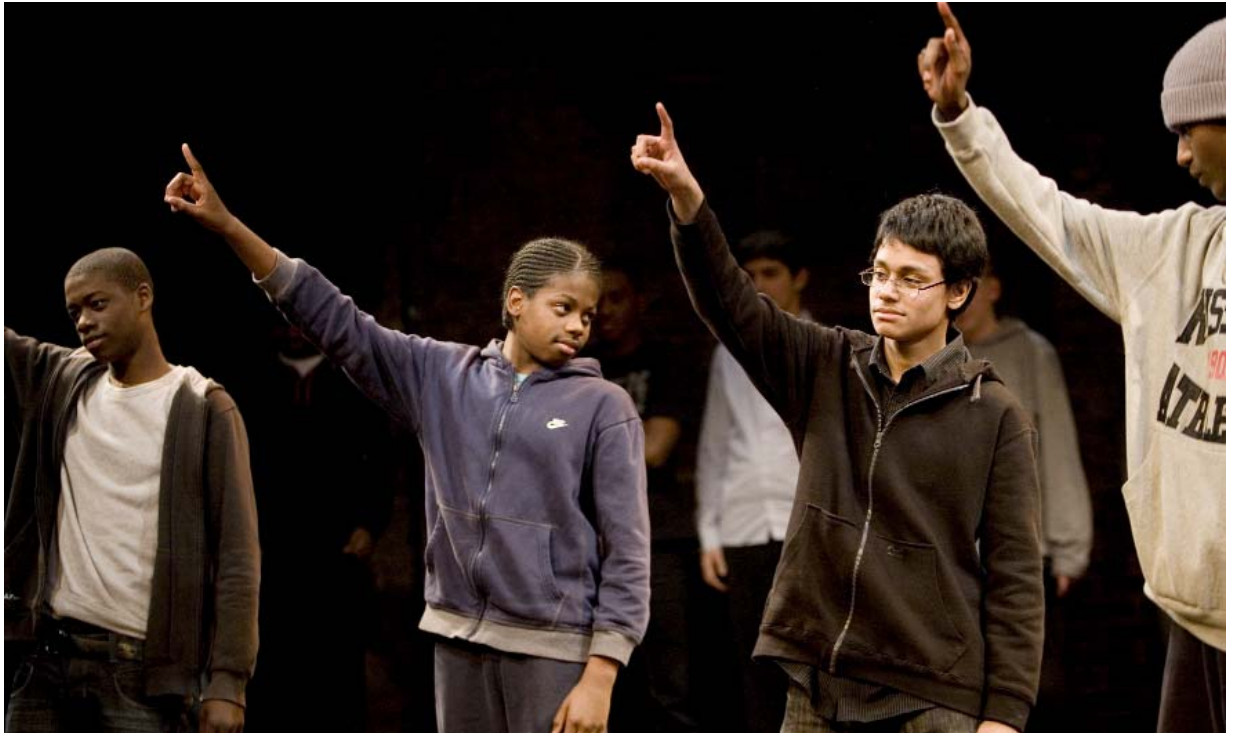
## Exercise Two: Manipulation and Control

**Duration:** 10-15 mins

**Aim:** To introduce participants to the tactics people use to manipulate others and the idea of the effect of witnessing this on the audience - finding the theatricality of manipulation and its role in storytelling.

**Discussion:** Discuss the idea of manipulation: how does it feel to realise you have been manipulated? Does anyone in the group feel they are good at manipulation? What do you think the word 'manipulation' means to the group? How and when can manipulation be useful? When can it be positive (i.e. telling a joke, telling a story, watching a film). Can you think of other examples?

**Practical Exercise:** Set up the room end-on style with an audience and a playing space. Ask for a volunteer (person A) to leave the room. Ask for five further volunteers whose job it will be to try and



make the person who has left the room drink a glass of liquid (or, if water is not available, to do another simple action as agreed). The five ‘manipulators’ can use any tactics they want and will have three minutes to try and persuade person A to drink – the rule is that they can’t touch person A, but they can drink the liquid or do anything else so long as it is safe. Ensure the five volunteers understand their task. Then brief person A outside the room – they should start from the position of not wanting to drink but after hearing all the five volunteers they can choose which one would make them consider drinking and why. Ideally the liquid should look suspiciously like urine - to maximise the effect of manipulation - so use apple juice rather than water and put on chair or table at the front. Let each person take a turn and then ask A who would have persuaded them and why?

**Evaluate:** What tactics were used? Were they high status or low status? What other ideas can the audience think of? What would have worked for them?

**Watching the Play:** How do the characters in *Becky Shaw* control and manipulate each other’s behaviour? Notice in particular how Max and Becky differ in their approach - or are they actually very similar in their manipulation and control of other characters?

### Exercise 3: Class and Difference

In *Becky Shaw* the both Susan and Max are very derogatory towards people they don’t perceive as their equal, because of their financial status or cultural background. The play is set in America – a society that doesn’t have as strong class distinctions as we do in the UK. Class in modern Britain is usually defined by your job but there are other indicators to help us recognise which class people belong to – by the way that speak, dress, what they buy and wear, and what they read and listen to.

**Discussion:** As a group, look at the American class sheet on page 34. Think also about class in the UK. Depending on the group this may require some more explanation and examples – which class(es) historically read *The Sun* or *The Telegraph*, watch BBC or ITV, go to a polo match or football match, call their evening meal ‘tea’ or ‘supper’ etc. Think about popular stereotypes of upper, middle and lower classes, both in the UK and in America.

**Practical Exercise:** Split into groups of five and create a short scene in which someone introduces their new friend or boyfriend / girlfriend to their friendship group or family. The new friend should be different in some way – how do the friends or family react?

**Evaluate:** Is there potential for comedy in this scenario? What do someone's reactions tell us about them? Is a sense of belonging important – how much do we stick with people like us?

**Watching the Play:** Notice which characters struggle with difference and how they talk about people who are different to them. Are they aware of what they are saying / doing; are they conscious of their own prejudices and opinions?



## Exercise 4: Script Work

**Duration:** 15-20 minutes

**Aim:** To encourage students to consider the theme of guilt and its purpose with the context of the play's dramatic action.

**You will need:** A copy of the script (extracts available on request from Almeida Projects, or full copies are available to buy from the Almeida Theatre Box Office or Kiosk).

**Practical Exercise:** In pairs, look at the following script extracts.

1. Scene One: Susan/Suzanna/Max. Page 5 (Max: *My proposal is that we keep to the plan...*) to Page 9 (Susan: *Lester and I will be having dinner privately and returning to Richmond.*).
2. Scene Three: Andrew/Becky. Page 54 (Andrew: *So you're OK...*) to Page 56 (end of scene).
3. Scene Seven: Becky/Max. Page 76 (Becky: *I absolutely understand...*) to Page 78 (end of scene). This extract contains strong language, so may be suitable for older groups only, at teacher's discretion.
4. Scene Nine: Suzanna/Susan. Page 87 (Suzanna: *Mom, that stuff about dad...*) to Page 90 (Susan: *If you're gay, be gay. Have some guts.*).

These are examples of how the themes we've looked at are explored in *Becky Shaw*. Identify the themes, and think about what we've learnt about them. Think about how your knowledge of the themes might influence the choices you make in staging your extract. Share short extracts back to the whole group, and discuss which themes came up in each extract.

**Evaluate:** What was effective about each group's staging of the scenes? How did they differ? What do you feel you have learnt about the character you were playing? Was your status clear? Did you find the language easy to perform?

**Watching the Play:** Ask students to keep an eye out for the short scenes they performed. What did the actors do different under Peter DuBois' direction? How was this effective?

# Almeida Projects



## **Becky Shaw** Almeida Projects Resource Pack

Written and designed by Charlie Payne, with contributions from Anne Langford and Stephanie Bell.

*Becky Shaw* by Gina Gionfriddo was produced at the Almeida Theatre 13 January - 5 March 2011.

The information in this Resource Pack is correct at the time of going to Press. All rights reserved. © Almeida Theatre, Published January 2011.

The Almeida Theatre is a Registered Charity No. 282167. The Almeida Theatre Company Limited, Almeida Street, London N1 1TA. Use of this Almeida Projects Resource Pack is authorised in connection with the Almeida Projects work at the Almeida Theatre. Any further use in any form must be approved by the creators. The copyright of all original material remains with the creators.

Almeida Projects photography: Ludovic des Cognets, Lucy Cullen.

Production and rehearsal photography: Hugo Glendinning.

## Almeida Projects is the Almeida Theatre's programme for young people.

Inspired by the Almeida Theatre's productions, Almeida Projects delivers a range of high quality, innovative activities to make the theatre accessible to young people, inspire them creatively and encourage an exploration of the power and potential of theatre.

*Almeida Projects provides an active, creative link between our theatre and its audience, more specifically an audience that may not have considered that the theatre might not be for them.*

*Our aim is to act as a catalyst to their energies, to their hunger to participate - celebrating the creativity of young people in the best way we know how: by offering them our experience, our expertise and our unique theatre.*

**Michael Attenborough**  
Artistic Director

Almeida Projects' work draws on all aspects of theatre, working with thousands of people each year, and includes: work in partnership with local schools; the Young Friend of the Almeida scheme; and a subsidised ticket scheme for schools. For more information please visit our website.

[www.almeida.co.uk/education](http://www.almeida.co.uk/education)

### Almeida Projects is supported by:

National Lottery through ArtsCouncil England  
Raymond Cazalet Charitable Trust  
The Noël Coward Foundation  
The Peter Harrison Foundation  
The City Parochial Foundation  
Mrs Sue Baring  
Lady Boothby  
Miss Deborah Brett  
Perdita Cargill-Thompson & Jonathan Martin  
Stamos J Fafalios  
Joachim Fleury  
Lord Hart of Chilton  
Tamara Ingram  
Jack & Linda Keenan  
Charles & Nicky Manby  
Georgia Oetker

Christopher Rodrigues  
Nicola Stanhope  
Jane Thompson  
Sarka Tourres  
Simon & Glennie Weil  
Andrew Goldstone and Jamie Arkell,  
London Marathon Runners 2011

**ALMEIDA**  
PROJECTS

   
LOTTERY FUNDED