St. Christopher **Study Guide**

A DVxT Theatre Company Study Guide by Lara Azzopardi

The purpose of this study guide is to provide materials that might be useful for teachers who are preparing classes for a performance of *St. Christopher* and to suggest a number of approaches to a discussion of the play once the performance has been seen.

From Fact to Fiction 1

a Playwright's Statement

St. Christopher was written while I was Playwright in Residence at Theatre Passe Muraille in 2002—2003. I began the play with an interest in writing a period piece about Toronto, as I have lived here for over a decade but know very little about the city that I call home. I began researching disasters in the city and came across the tragic story of the *Noronic*, which serves as a backdrop for the play.

At the time, the war in Afghanistan and burgeoning invasion of Iraq was on everyone's mind and the two ideas came together to form the backbone of the story: the collision of industry, capitalism and the fractured lives of soldiers who have been unable to acclimatize themselves with the world they were fighting for. What began as a serious and depressing look at the human mind, transformed into an entertaining and sympathetic story about people and how ill-advised choices can have serious repercussions.

In the past year of describing this play to others, I was not surprised that most people believe the story of the *Noronic* to be a fabrication; we should probably all get to know Toronto a little better.

A. Shay Hahn
Toronto, July 2004

Matters for Discussion:

1. *St. Christopher* takes a significant event in Canadian history and uses it as a backdrop for the action of the play. What is the value of fictionalizing our history?

2. The author has taken the lives of four fictional characters and placed them in a historical context. How much can an author assume his audience knows about specific moments in our history—in this instance, the Second World War? Does the author assume the audience has a particular point of view concerning these historical events? How does one's attitude to this historical moment affect how one responds to the play? What effect does it have on one's response to the play if one does not have any particular attitude to that historical moment?

3. What are some of the way a writer of fiction can use historical figures? What responsibility, is any, does the playwright take on when he or she represents a historical figure in fiction?

4. The author states, "What began as a serious and depressing look at the human mind, transformed into and entertaining and sympathetic story about people and how ill-advised choices can have serious repercussions." What does the author mean by this? Can you think of other examples of an author turning a serious historical event into an entertainment?

5. The author began writing *St. Christopher* by researching "disasters in the city"; why do you suppose he chose this way of proceeding, and what effect might it have had upon the play he would end up with?

The Setting 2

a Toronto in 1949

Toronto is the capital of the province of Ontario. It has the most populous metropolitan area in Canada and, as the most important city in Canada's most prosperous province, is the country's financial and commercial centre. Its location on the northern shore of Lake Ontario, which forms part of the border between Canada and the United States, and its access to Atlantic shipping via the St. Lawrence Seaway and to major U.S. industrial centres via the Great Lakes have enabled Toronto to become an important international trading centre.

In the 1940s, Toronto, still recovering from the severe financial problems brought about by the Great Depression,faced a rapid increase in population after the Second World War, which added to the municipal burden. In 1949, the Prime Minister was Louis Stephen St. Laurent, a Liberal Quebec lawyer. St. Laurent continued most of the domestic policies of his predecessor but pursued a more activist foreign policy. His time in office coincided with the intensification of the Cold War in the late 1940s, which brought an increase in defense spending. The increased defense expenditures, combined with opposition from provincial governments, eventually forced him and his government to curtail plans to expand existing social programs or to introduce such new ones as a national health insurance scheme. St. Laurent was a popular leader, especially in Quebec, and was aided by a strong cabinet team and an effective civil service. He won major victories in the 1949 and 1953 federal elections, reinforcing the notion that the Liberals were “the government party,” destined to govern Canada forever.

Over the following years Toronto grew to become an internationally known city. The city improved transportation by constructing expressways and other roads, a new airport terminal building (1962), and an excellent subway. The city's population was traditionally Protestant, and largely of British origin, but during the 1950s and 1960s Toronto was one of the fastest-growing urban areas in North America, with an influx of European immigrants that transformed the character of the city, so that by 1961 less than half the inhabitants of the central city were of British extraction. From the 1970s European immigrants were augmented by large numbers from the West Indies and Asia.

Other interesting facts about 1949:

- April 16, 1949, The Toronto Maple Leafs defeat the Detroit Red Wings and win the Stanley Cup for the third time in a row
- Twelve nations sign the North Atlantic Treaty, establishing NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)
- Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* debuts and George Orwell publishes *1984*
- The Soviet Union begins testing atomic weapons.
- Antibiotics are developed

Matters for Discussion

The Toronto of the period before the Second World War was very different from the Toronto that emerged after the war (the period in which the play is set), and that Toronto, in turn, differs from the Toronto of today.

1. The characters in the play feel changes that have occurred in the city in the years after the war, and they want to change with it. After some research, create a table, or write a report, comparing Toronto before the Second World War and after.

2. Make a similar comparison between Toronto in 1949 and in 2005. Each Student might choose to explore a specific way in which the city has changed, in such areas as technology, culture, politics, geography, or an area of your choice, and share your observations with the class.

3. Write a description of Toronto/Canada in 1949, in terms of technology, culture, politics, geography and another description of Toronto/Canada today. Compare and contrast your findings within a group and discuss what you discover.

4. Compare Canada's role in the Second World War, its international status during the postwar years, and its role in the world of today.

5. How were Hitler, Stalin, Truman, and Churchill portrayed in Canada in 1949? Try to find periodicals and/or books to help with your research.

b The Second World War

Canada in the Second World War

On September 9,1939, Canada's Parliament voted to declare war on Germany. Canada's separate declaration of war was a measure of the independence granted in the 1931 Statute of Westminster; in 1914 there had been no such independence and no separate declaration of war. The vote was nearly unanimous, a result that rested on the assumption that there was to be a “limited liability” war effort that would consist primarily of the supply of raw materials, foodstuffs, and munitions, and the training of Commonwealth air crews, mainly for the Royal Air Force. Canadian men were to be actively discouraged from serving in the infantry, which was expected to take high casualties, and few infantry units were planned. If this plan were followed, Prime Minister King and other government leaders reasoned, conscription would be unnecessary. King and the leader of the Conservative opposition had both pledged themselves to a “no conscription” policy even before the war began.

The expulsion of the British from Europe and the fall of France in May and June of 1940 completely changed the circumstances. Canada's overseas allies had fallen or were in danger of doing so. Canada now stood in the forefront of the war. After England, it was now the second most powerful of Germany's adversaries. In August of 1940 Canada signed an agreement with the United States on the defence of North America at Ogdensburg, N.Y.

The emphasis on supply now had to give way to an emphasis on combat forces. King's “no conscription” policy had been modified in 1940 when the government introduced conscription for home defence, but at the same time King had renewed his pledge not to send conscripts overseas for active duty. In 1942, the King government asked Canadian voters to release it from that pledge in a national plebiscite and won a clear majority, except in Quebec, where a majority voted against conscription. Thereafter, compulsory service for home defence was enforced. But King, fearing an Anglo-French division, did not send conscripts overseas during the early years of the war, preferring to avoid such a move unless absolutely necessary.

In June 1944 Canada was assigned one of the five invasion beaches in Normandy, France. Casualties began to mount quickly as the Battle of Normandy dragged on; the Canadian army became strapped for infantry reinforcements. The high infantry casualties of late summer and early fall 1944 began to cripple the Canadian army. King's minister of national defence, J.L. Ralston, supported sending conscripts overseas and was forced to resign as a result. That resignation precipitated a cabinet crisis, which was resolved in November 1944 when King relented agreeing to send conscripts to the front to reinforce the army's infantry units.

Not only was Canada's war effort in the Second World War far more extensive than that in the First World War, it also had a much more lasting impact on Canadian society. By the end of the war, more than 1,000,000 Canadians (about 50,000 of whom were women) had served in the three services. Casualties were lower than in the previous war, with approximately 42,000 killed or having died in service and 54,400 wounded. The domestic war effort was no less significant. Canada hosted, and paid much of the cost of, the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, which trained more than 100,000 Commonwealth airmen. Canadian factories turned out everything from rifles to heavy bombers, and Canadian scientists, technicians, and engineers worked on advanced weapons technology, including the atomic bomb (for which Canada supplied the uranium ore). Canadian foods, cash contributions to Britain, and munitions for the Allies (including the Soviet Union) contributed to the overall war effort.

The Yalta Conference

On February 4 to 11, 1945 in Yalta, in the Crimea, there was a conference of the three chief Allied leaders, President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the United States, Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain, and Premier Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union to plan the final defeat and occupation of Nazi Germany. The conference affirmed a project for dividing Germany into occupation zones, with the U.S. zone reduced in order to provide a fourth zone, for the French to occupy. The three leaders made several pledges: to furnish the defeated Germans with the necessities for survival, to eliminate or control all German industry that could be used for armaments, to bring major war criminals to trial, and to set up a commission in Moscow for the purpose of determining what reparation Germany should pay.

After the agreements reached at Yalta were made public in 1946, they were harshly criticized in the United States. This was because, as events turned out, Stalin failed to keep his promise to hold free elections in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Instead, Communist governments were established in all those countries, noncommunist political parties were suppressed, and genuinely democratic elections were never held. At the time of the Yalta Conference, both Roosevelt and Churchill had trusted Stalin to keep his word. Neither leader had suspected that Stalin intended that all the Popular Front governments in Europe would be taken over by Communists. Roosevelt and Churchill were further inclined to assent to the Yalta agreements because they assumed, mistakenly as it turned out, that Soviet assistance would be sorely needed to defeat the Japanese in the Pacific and Manchuria. In any case, the Soviet Union was the military occupier of Eastern Europe at the war's end, so there was little the Western democracies could do to enforce the promises made by Stalin at Yalta.

The Potsdam Conference

The last inter-Allied conference of the Second World War, code-named “Terminal,” was held in the suburb of Potsdam, outside ruined Berlin, from July 17 to August 2, 1945. The chief participants were U.S. President Harry S. Truman, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. While in Potsdam, Truman told Stalin that the United States' had a new weapon, the atomic bomb, which it intended to use against Japan. On July 26, the conference issues an ultimatum to Japan demanding unconditional surrender; the alternative would be heavier air attacks. After Japan rejected this ultimatum, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The protocols of the Potsdam Conference suggested continued harmony among the Allies, but the deeply conflicting aims of the Western democracies on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other in fact meant that Potsdam was to be the last Allied summit conference.

Further material concerning The Second World War can be found at the Encyclopedia Britannica web site: http://search.eb.com

Matters for Discussion:

1. Consider your own perspective on the current war in Iraq and the world—wide war on terror. How does it differ from the attitudes of Tom and Markagh respectively, toward their war?

2. What direct impact, if any, has the Second World War had upon your life?

c *SS Noronic*

In the summer of 1949, SS Noronic weighed anchor from her berth in downtown Detroit at 11:00 a.m., crossed Lake Erie to Cleveland to pick up more passengers and then sailed through the Welland Canal into Lake Ontario. The Noronic was one of the finest ships ever to sail on the Great Lakes. First-time passengers marvelled at her great dining room, the length of her promenade decks, the curving sweep of her carved staircases, her teak, cherry and oak walls and the pampered comfort of her staterooms. The Noronic was known on both shores as "The Queen of the Inland Seas." In the early days, she seldom sailed without a band in attendance. The Noronic plied the waterways between Canada and the United States for years, as did her sister ships, SS Huronic and SS Harmonic. As if a harbinger of things to come, the Harmonic caught fire in 1945; only one fatality was suffered in that event. By 1949, the Noronic was thirty-six years old, yet still considered the finest and largest ship of her kind afloat on the Great Lakes. She had never been in dire peril from the weather, nor did she ever once call for assistance while cruising the lakes.

On this fateful voyage of September 1949, 524 passengers and 171 crew-members, mostly Americans from Cleveland, were enjoying a late-summer excursion to Canada. By 6:00 p.m., September 16, the Noronic slid into her Canadian Steamship Line berth in Toronto – Pier 9, at the foot of Yonge Street. This overnight stop in Toronto offered the passengers a chance to go ashore and experience a little of Toronto's nightlife. By around 2:00 a.m. most of the passengers had re-boarded. It was a cool night, with the temperature around 15 degrees Celsius, and a steady wind from the southwest. Many of those who remained on the ship would not live to see the sunrise. Instead, their peaceful slumber would become a collective nightmare of panic and chaos – fire on the water.

At about 2:30 a.m., a passenger noticed smoke coming from a door to a walk-in closet, used to store linen. The door was locked, so he ran down the port corridor to the social hall. He and a bellboy went back to the closet. Hearing the crackling sound of fire from behind the door, they opened it. With a fresh source of oxygen, the flames back-drafted down the hall in both directions. Still with the hope of containing the fire, one of the men courageously went to get a fire hose, but when they opened the valve only a trickle of water came out.

The night watchman for Pier 9 had his back to the ship, but noticed an orange glow on the walls in front of him. As he turned to look at the ship, the whistle began to blow. He was situated on the starboard side of the ship, and it was evident that the fire, having begun on the port side, had now progressed to the danger point. The night watchman immediately called the operator to connect him with the fire department. At 2:38 a.m. the first fire alarm was sounded and a pumper-truck, a hose wagon, a high-pressure truck, an aerial truck, a rescue squad, and the deputy chief were dispatched. One minute after that, the Toronto fire department contacted its fire boat and instructed it to proceed full throttle to Pier 9 to aid in the effort.

Later, survivors would attest to the incredible speed with which the fire spread. "She went up like a paint factory," said one heavily bandaged survivor. "It just went off like the head of a match," said another.

Street District Chief Jim Stevens's first image of the ship was an orange glow in the sky and a ship silhouetted by flames. Thomas Benson, the driver of the fire truck, noted, "As we went down Yonge Street and came up on Queen's Quay, we could see the boat was a mass of flames. Chief Stevens radioed in the second alarm while we were still driving to the scene." It was 2:41 a.m. The first units of the fire department to arrive at the port witnessed every seaport fireman's worst nightmare: the top three decks of the Noronic were fully ablaze, and the only signs of life on B Deck at the bow and the stern were the moving shapes of people against a backdrop of fire. Most were milling about, not knowing how to get off the ship; others were taking their chances by jumping into the chilly, dark waters below – and then screaming for help.

It was clear to all that the most daunting task was getting people off the ship. The firefighters setting up fire department Aerial Number 5, an 85-foot long wooden ladder, at the base of Noronic's bow, and aligned it with B Deck. It had barely made contact when a woman jumped upon it, along with many other passengers. The fast-clambering passengers, in a near-frenzy, and the natural movement of the ship made it very difficult for the fire-fighters to keep the ladder aligned on the tip of the bow. Panicking, a female passenger stumbled on the ladder, and the following passengers fell into her, their combined weight focused on one point on the ladder. With a terrifying crack, the ladder snapped in two and sent the frightened passengers into the cold water.

For the passengers who remained on board, the clouds of smoke and flames promised certain death. If they chose to jump into the murky, chilly waters that surrounded the vessel, they might drown. Many courageously took the leap and a number of desperate souls were soon bobbing around the Noronic in the cool waters of Lake Ontario. For rescuers, it was tough getting them out of the water. Miraculously, of those who jumped off the ship, some from heights of over thirty meters, only one person drowned.

Because of the Noronic's peculiar layout, access routes to and from the ship were only on E Deck – many of those in cabins above could not get off. They found their exits to lower decks blocked by fire or smoke. Many died in a mad dash around the upper decks looking for a safe point from which to traverse to the pier. Firefighters made valiant efforts to extinguish the flames, but the heat was so intense that the water vaporized before it reached the hull of the ship! The metal structure was visibly white from the intense heat. By 2:46 a.m., the fireboat had tied up to the Noronic's bow and had begun to pour water into the ship via two smaller hoses and the turret nozzle. It had only been a little more than fifteen minutes since the fire was first noticed by night watchman.

After the fireboat had been pouring water into the ship for about an hour, the Noronic began to list toward the pier. Deputy Chief Herd ordered the fire fighters and the fireboat to pull back to a safe distance. Soon the Noronic righted herself and settled on the bottom of the slip, while she continued to burn above the water-line. Since there was no danger of the ship's rolling over, the fire-fighters returned to their original positions and the fireboat began spraying water into the portholes along the starboard side of the ship.

That night the Toronto Fire Department laid thirty-seven hoses and poured more than 1.7 million gallons into Noronic. The fire was under control by 5:00 a.m., but the hull was still white hot in many places and had to cool before searchers could enter. The crews then began the grim task of recovering victims. No one had any idea of the casualties; rumours were that more than 200 were dead. Firefighter Tom Benson recalls, "We got aboard at daylight and there were bodies everywhere. Some were cremated with just a skull or backbone remaining. The intensity of the heat was such that human bone was incinerated." All day long, bodies were carried off the ship on stretchers, one by one, under tarps. A temporary morgue was set up at the pier, but the bodies were so numerous that eventually they had to be transported to a larger facility; the Horticultural Building at the Toronto Exhibition was converted to a morgue.

Dealing with the charred and fragmented remains proved to be a significant challenge. By the time the Toronto Fire Department developed its preliminary report of the incident six days later, the number of lost and missing had climbed to 122. Sixty-nine of the 697 passengers and 171 crew-members aboard the Noronic at the time of the fire were known to be dead, and 53 were missing. When the official court inquiry released its findings, approximately a month after the fire, the death toll would be 118, with 104 dead and 14 missing. The severity of the damage to the victims was such that new forensic identification processes had to be developed to identify the dead, and even so, 14 were unidentifiable. This new identification process is still applied today.
The task of identifying the dead was never wholly completed, because some had been travelling under pseudonyms. Four who died were never identified – presumably a quartet of widows or widowers.

Matters for Discussion

1. Try to imagine the panic and chaos that night on the Noronic. Imagine you were one of the survivors on the *Noronic*; write a short description of your experience.

2. What can we learn about the passengers on the *Noronic* from Miriam and Paul's conversation? Imagine the atmosphere on the *Noronic* before the fire. Speaking about the passengers, Paul states, "This bunch here, they want to go on a cruise, but without the types who you'd usually find on a cruise." What do you think Paul is suggesting here?

3. Why do you think the playwright chooses not to show the actual fire on stage?

The Characters 3

a Adolf Hitler (1889—1945)

Born in Austria, Adolf Hitler (otherwise known as Der Führer, German for "The Leader"), became leader of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party in 1920-21 and chancellor of Germany in 1933; after President Paul von Hindenburg's death, he assumed the twin titles of Führer and chancellor (1934—1945). Hitler had a hatred of poverty, a rabid devotion to his German heritage, and an extreme loathing of the Jewish people; such things were the foundation of his political doctrines.

Hitler, although already dead at the time of the play, is secretly living underground. His much-vaunted Third Reich, which was to have endured forever, ended ingloriously after twelve years of unparalleled barbarity in which 30 million people lost their lives, 12 million of them far away from the battlefields, by mass shootings, in forced labour camps, and in the gas chambers of Beslen, Dachau, Auschwitz, Ravensbruck, and other concentration camps, in accordance with Nazi racial theories and the "New Order", not forgetting the indiscriminate torture and murder of many prisoners of war or the uprooting and extermination of entire village communities in Poland, France, and Russia. Such horror prompted the international trial at Nuremberg (1945—46) ,in which twenty-one of the leading living Nazis were tried and executed for war crimes.

b Winston Churchill (1874—1965)

Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill was a British statesman, orator, and author who as prime minister (1940—45, 1951—55) rallied the British people during the Second World War and led his country from the brink of defeat to victory. After a sensational rise to prominence in national politics before the First World War, Churchill acquired a reputation for erratic judgment in the war itself and in the decade that followed. Politically suspect in consequence, he was a lonely figure until his response to Adolf Hitler's challenge brought him to leadership of a national coalition in 1940. With Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin he then shaped Allied strategy in the Second World War, and after the breakdown of the alliance he alerted the West to the expansionist threat of the Soviet Union. He led the Conservative Party back to office in 1951 and remained prime minister until 1955, when ill health forced his resignation.

c Joseph Stalin (1979—1953)

The son of a shoemaker, Stalin was educated in the hope that one day he would become a priest, but he was expelled from school for propagating Marxism. He joined the Bolshevik underground and was arrested and transported to Serbia but escaped in 1904. In 1922 he was appointed to General Secretary to the Central Committee, where he began to build up the power he needed in order to ensure his control of Russia after Lenin's death, which occurred in 1924. His reorganization of the USSR's resources, with its successive five-year plan, suffered many setbacks and was resisted consistently by stubborn proprietors, who refused to accept the principle of collectivization. Stalin's way of disciplining his objectors involved death by execution and the starvation of up to ten million people (1932—33).
At the Yalta (1945) and Potsdam (1945) conferences Stalin outwitted the allied leaders, with the result that he took political control of most of Eastern Europe. He inaugurated a ruthless "cold war" against all non—communist countries. He died of what is said to have been a brain hemorrhage. In 1962 the Party Congress voted to remove Stalin's body from the Mausoleum of Lenin; instead he was buried in an ordinary grave near the Kremlin.

d Harry S. Truman (1884—1972)

Harry S. Truman, the thirty-third president of the United States was born and educated in Missouri. He served as an artillery captain on the western front during the First World War, after which he worked as a farmer and then went into business in a men's clothing store, which quickly failed. In 1922 he became a judge for the Eastern District of Jackson County in Missouri, and in 1926 became presiding judge, a post he held till 1934, when Missouri elected him as a Democratic Senator. He was elected Vice-President in 1944, and became President in April of 1945, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt died. He was re-elected in 1948 in a surprise victory over Thomas E. Dewey. During his presidency he made many important historical decisions, including dropping the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, making a major change in US policy toward the then USSR, the Truman Doctrine of Communist containment and support for free peoples resisting subjugation; establishing NATO (1949); sending US troops on behalf of the UN to withstand the Communist invasion of South Korea (1950); and establishing the CIA. In 1952 he retired to Missouri.

More information on Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin and Henry S. Truman can be found at the Encyclopedia Britannica web site: www.eb.com

e Paul Wares

A passenger on SS Noronic. A businessman, he claims to be on vacation, but in fact he is caught up in illegal work with Miriam Warren's father. Paul stores unregistered cars and car parts that Mr. Warren, and others like him, have contracted to build but have never delivered. During the war he obtained false papers stating that he had a medical condition and was therefore unable to serve. At the time of the play he has been set up by Miriam's parents as a good match for their daughter.

f Miriam Warren

Also a passenger on the SS Noronic, Miriam is an American from Detroit, Michigan. At ninteen years of age, she comes from a privileged family. While privilege has many perks, however, there are also restraints associated with it. Her father, a prominent businessman, is, as far as she knows, in the automotive business. Miriam is an aspiring writer and adventurer. She thirsts for freedoms that are not available to a young woman like herself—living at that time and in that social stratum. She has a mind of her own, and consequently has dreams and plans that are uncommon among her contemporaries. She is constantly being set up by her parents to meet the perfect (i.e., rich) man and settle down. This is her first time in Toronto, and she wants to finally take her fate into her own hands.

g Tom Carberry

Born in Winnipeg, Tom enlisted at the age of seventeen to fight in the war. Tom considers himself a Buddhist, and he wants to go to university to study history in the hope of one day becoming a professor. Tom finds himself on a mission to understand how the war he experienced fits into history, and how this understanding can affect the future. Hit by shrapnel while fighting in France, he was shipped to London, where he secretly lived in a courtyard of the British Museum. There he met Markagh Beam. The two men stole artifacts from the museum and moved to Canada to sell their loot to prospective clients. Currently, Tom is working at the Toronto harbour, where he runs freight schedules.

h Markagh Beam

Markagh, born in London, England, was regarded as the perfect soldier and was decorated for his outstanding contribution to the war. While he was servicing, his entire family was killed. After meeting Tom at the Museum, he joined him in Toronto, but not before they stole a number of antiques from the museum to sell once they arrived in Canada. He is involved in a big deal with Paul Wares and Miriam Warren's father, selling them antique candlesticks.

Matters for Discussion

1. Tom is trying to make sense of his life by contextualizing history, while Markagh seems to just accept the past for what it was. How do these two perspectives on life affect the characters? Compare and contrast.

2. Discuss the descriptions of Miriam's family: her mother, her aunt, and her father. How have their actions and words affected Miriam's life choices?

3. Miriam discovers new information about her father during the play; how does this change her perspective on her family and herself?

4. Historical figures can become something more than just persons; they can become icons. Of the historical figures depicted in the play—Hitler, Stalin, Churchill, and Truman which one are you most familiar with? What do you know about this person?

5. What is Paul's perception of himself and the war? Is Paul's position justifiable?

6. Is there a range of moral judgments that you find yourself making on the characters? What are these judgments based on, and what are the criteria by which we judge some moral lapses to be more serious than others?

7. Who is your favourite character and why? Whom do you most identify with in the play?

8. Does the play depict a particular social structure? Do the characters fit into a class system? Are there any characters who do not fit into such a structure?

9. What do you think will happen to the characters after the final scene of the play?

The Telling of the Story 4

a History and narrative

Historical fiction blends historical facts with products of the author's creative imagination. If successful, the author can express significant insights, making use of the reader's understanding of certain people and events. But, in the words of A.J.P. Taylor, "History is not just a catalogue of events put in the right order like a railway timetable. History is a version of events."

The playwright has chosen to draw on our collective understanding of vertain historical figures from the Second World War and their actions in order to better reveal the characters, themes and plot of *St. Christopher*. In his use of these historical figures in his play, he has made certain assumptions about our understanding of the events of the Second World War. Do you think this helped clarify *St. Christopher*, or did it make the play more confusing?

Matters for Discussion

1. By integrating real people into fictitious scenes within the play the author invites the audience to draw parallels between his characters and the historical figures. How does this device involve the audience? What does his use of the device imply about the other characters in the play?

2. Author Jessamyn West once said, "Fiction reveals truths that reality obscures." What truths do you think *St. Christopher* reveals about war, power, and politicians?

3. Discuss the use of real characters and events in fictional stories in recent movies and television programs.

b Role-playing

There are many different ways in which an author may choose to present a story and characters on stage. Role-playing is a theme that runs throughout the play, but it is also a tool used in *St. Christopher* to tell the story. Actors play characters, and, in turn, these characters also play roles. The playwright does not attempt to hide the fact that the actors who play certain characters also playthe historical figures. They put on costumes and become the figures right before our eyes. Miriam dons Paul's suit and pretends to be a man, while Tom and Markagh dress up and pretend to be passengers on board the ship.

Matters for Discussion

1. In *St. Christopher*, the male actors play double roles and triple roles—their fictional characters and the historical figures: Paul-Hitler-Truman, Tom-Churchill and Markagh-Stalin. What comment is the playwright making about Paul, Tom and Markagh on the basis of the historical character each actor also portrays? Can we look at Tom, Paul, and Markagh in the same light after seeing the actors playing them dressed like the political figures mentioned above? Discuss the appropriateness of each character to the role(s) he plays.

2. Why does the actor playing Miriam not double as another character? What is the significance of her costume? What does it mean for Miriam to put on a man's suit?

3. In society, people play roles all the time. What is the author saying about role-playing? What roles do you play, and why do you play them? To make your life less complicated? To give you an advantage? To hide something? To become what you want to be? For other reasons?

c Present, past, & future

When preparing a story for the theatre, the playwright imagines an action that takes place in the present tense, that is, in a dramatic situation between characters. However, in order for the present situation to make sense, the audience often needs some information about the characters' past. In a realistic play, this means that a credible situation must be invented in which one character will communicate such information to another. Can you always believe what the characters say about themselves and their past? Can you always believe what the characters say about each other?

After seeing a play like *St. Christopher*, in which extreme changes in the characters' lives occur, it is tempting to speculate about what might become of the characters after the action of the play is over.

Matters for Discussion

1. Discuss some of the devices by which the playwright makes the communication of the facts of the characters' past credible. Do we rely wholly on what the characters say about themselves? Do we rely on what is said about them by others?

2. Paul Wares and Markagh Beam are similar in that they dismiss the past entirely and constantly look towards the future. Tom is obsessed with the past and depends on it to reveal the future. Where do you think Miriam's position on the past and future lies?

3. Hitler and Stalin were both great destroyers of the past in the name of the future. Discuss this fact in relation to Paul, Tom, Markagh and Miriam and to the burning of the *Noronic*.

4. What is in store for Miriam and Tom? For Markagh? If Paul Wares did manage to survive the fire, what does the future hold for him? Because the range of possibilities is so great, it might be useful to have groups of students choose widely differing prophecies, and then justify their positions in debate format.

5. How do you think the past has influenced the characters of the play? How does the past affect the choices they make during the play?

Imagery 5

There are many tools for expressing meaning in the theatre in addition to the story-telling elements or plot, character, and setting. The word "imagery" is a useful word that has a wide range of reference. It can refer to what the audience sees and hears directly, such as the music we hear at the beginning of the play or the lighting of the match at the end of the play. But the word can also refer to mental pictures, sense experiences, memories, associations, patterns, or structures that are called up in our minds and bodies through the dialogue, or through what we find out about the setting or the characters' pasts—what is often referred to as a visceral reaction to the play.

The word imagery may be broadly interpreted; almost anything in a play can be felt to have the force of an image, if it evokes associations beyond itself. Reference has already been made to the presence in the play of the war, fire, the ocean, and travel. The assumption has been that if students allow these presences to work upon their imaginations, associations will arise that will become part of the whole experience of the play, even though they may not contribute directly to the presentation of the string of incidents that is the story.

A few more images will be mentioned here, and the hope is that students will be encouraged to carry interpretation beyond the brief questions and comments that follow:

a Time

A clock ticks away during the opening of the play. The clock is a cause of paranoia and unrest for Hitler. He is very distressed by the sound of time:

> "It's that damn clock. I run these halls in my robe with a hammer to end that noise. It's hidden down here, just when I think I've found it—it fades then starts again in the direction I came from. I will be wandering these corridors forever with nothing to strike at. I am Sisyphus."

In Act Two, Tom explains how timetables help reveal the future: "There's an order to all this, it's what I do, what I want to do, to study history. You have to organize it like a schedule, a time line, events happen and subsequent events take place, if you pay attention you can read the patterns." When Markagh questions Tom's obsession with history and artifacts, Tom replies, "it's the progression, what they reveal about the society that made them…they're clues to a bigger picture."

Matters for Discussion

1. There seems to be a correlation between time and mistakes. The past holds our mistakes. Is Hitler trying to escape his past/his mistakes? Is such a thing possible? How does Hitler's paranoia with respect to time and Tom's obsession with history compare?

2. Consider your own bedroom and try to recall the artifacts in it. Make a list of all your little knick-knacks, posters, photographs etc., and try to put together a history of what those things represent and say about you.

3. Create a timetable of your life. Using that information create a timetable of the future; try to predict some possibilities that lie ahead.

b St. Christopher

St. Christopher (meaning Christ-bearer), was a powerfully built man who wandered the world in search of novelty and adventure. Before he was known as St. Christopher his name was Offero. Offero came upon a hermit who lived beside a dangerous stream and served others by guiding them places to cross. He gave Christopher instruction in the truth of God. Christopher took the hermit's place, but instead of guiding travellers, he carried them safely across the stream. One day he carried a small child across the stream. The child's weight nearly crushed him. When they arrived on the other side, the child revealed himself to be Christ. The reason he was so heavy is that he bore the weight of the world. Christ baptized Offero with water from the stream. Christopher's service at the stream led to his patronage of things related to travel and travellers, and of people who carry things.

Matters for discussion

1. Why do you think the author has chosen to title the play St. Christopher?

2. St. Christopher and the *Noronic* are both symbols of travel; they both bear travellers on a journey. Discuss each character as a bearer; what are they bearing with them on their journeys? Are they also being carried? If so, by whom or by what?

3. All the characters are, or have been, travellers. Discuss each character's destination. Have any reached their destinations by the end of the play, or are some characters still in transit?

4. In the play Markagh has named his bayonet after St. Christopher. Why do you think the playwright made this choice? What is he saying about the saintliness of St. Christopher? What is he saying about Markagh?

c War

Tom tells Miriam about the war and his experiences: "The Bomb changed everything, everyone's life. I've been trying to figure out how it all fits together — how we got to this stage, that now we live in a world that doesn't need soldiers. That the next wars are with us everyday, hanging over our heads like a roof — and I'm going to help people understand that."

Matters for discussion

1. Tom states that "The Bomb changed everything." Do you think he is right? Has the world changed since the United States dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? After September 11, 2001 a similar sentiment was expressed, that "everything will be different." Discuss in debate format how such events affect us—or do not affect us—and in what ways. What have "world-changing" events changed? How have they affected our lives at the present time?

2. Everyone had a role during the war. Paul Ware states, "You don't have to wear a uniform to serve your country." What do you think Paul means by this?

3. What would the role of a woman have been during the Second World War? How has the role of women in war changed since then?

d Buddha

Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 BC), also known as the Buddha or "Enlightened One," was the founder of Buddhism, one of the great religions of the world. He was born the son of a wealthy ruler of a kingdom near Nepal, in Asia. Many miracles are said to have heralded his birth. When Siddhartha became aware of the misery of the world, he left his palace, his father, his wife, and his children, and wandered for seven years seeking the truth. He reached spiritual enlightenment while sitting under a Bo-tree. He spent the remainder of his life teaching the people who gathered about him.

In Buddhist traditions, the Buddha lived many lives; his previous lives are described in the Jatakas, stories and folklore that play an important role in Buddhist art and education. The Buddha based his entire teaching on the reality of human suffering. Existence is painful. The conditions that make an individual are precisely those that give rise to desire; inevitably, desire causes suffering.
Tom has a picture of the Amitabha Buddha; a savior figure, which emphasizes faith above all else. He Represents love, and is pictured as being the rich, warm colour of the setting sun.

Matters for discussion

1. After Tom's experience as a soldier, how do you think Buddhism has helped him to carry on with his life and passions?
2. Tom speaks about the power of Buddhism and the idea of rebirth. Does anyone go through a kind of rebirth in the play?
3. In order for a rebirth to occur something must be destroyed. Discuss this in terms of the events in the play.

f Dancing

The image of dancing is evoked throughout the play. For example: there is a dance party on the ship, Miriam and Paul have just left the dance floor to go to his cabin, Tom and Markagh want to board the ship in hopes of dancing with pretty young girls, the play opens with a party lingering in the background of the action occurring on stage.

1. Most of the play is constructed in scenes between two characters. In ballet, a two-person dance is referred to as a "pas-de-deux." The dictionary also describes a pas-de-deux as "A close relationship between two people or things, as during an activity." How has the playwright used this device throughout the play to reveal plot, character, and motive?

2. A dance can be described as a kind of game—a particular form of game ,with rules and role-playing. There is usually a leader and a follower. In each scene, who is leading the dance? Hitler or Churchill? Paul or Miriam? Tom or Miriam? Tom or Markagh? Stalin or Truman? Do the roles change during the dance?

g Fire

The image of fire is important to the play—not just in the burning of the *Noronic*, but also at the end of the play, when a game involving the lighting of a match begins between Truman and Stalin. The last image we are left with is a match burning in the darkness.

Matters for discussion

1. Why do you think the author has chosen to leave the audience with such an image? What is its significance?
2. What are some of the other meanings that fire might have for the characters and the play?

Themes 6

Themes have been left to last for good reason; too early a consideration of themes might lead to a premature judgment concerning what the play is "about." But more importantly, if the play is successful, the themes will emerge as an inevitable result of an examination of the material of the play: the characters, the action, the setting, and the imagery. To begin by looking for the theme implies that these elements are merely the means to an end, and that once we have isolated what the play is "about," we can take that home and leave the play behind.

For example, women's liberation is an obvious theme, and it makes an important contribution to what the play has to say thematically. Miriam speaks more than once to the fact that women are disadvantaged by their lack of training in the skills by which men master the world. But a more interesting development occurs near the end, when we realize that the games men play may offer her no more personal and mental freedom than the games played by the society women she has shunned.

Students will already have discovered and pondered the themes of the play, then, if they have been discussing the questions that make up the body of this study guide.

a Women in society

Miriam describes the opportunities of a woman in her position:

MIRIAM: When you've grown up in the circumstances that I have, Mr. Wares, if you have any sense in your head, you see there are no expectations for a woman, none, except to present your self like a flower and lure in a husband and you know how that story ends, babies, croquet, followed by more babies. I have to marry a man just like father or I'll be thought of as the next Aunt Esther, a spinster with a teacup poodle.

Matters for discussion

1. Discuss this outlook of Miriam's and how it influences the choices she makes during the play. Do you think her perceptions change at the end?

2. Miriam's desire to run off and explore the world doesn't seem so outlandish to a modern Western woman. Why would this act be so scandalous to her family and her social world?

3. How has the world changed for young women? Have new "freedoms" really given women more choice and more power?

b Games and deception

A prominent theme throughout the play is that of games of deception. The characters are constantly deceiving each other. No one really knows who anyone is. But to play a game properly one must know one's opponent. The play is set around in and around a cruise ship, an isolated place where many social games are played.

Paul Wares describes the patrons of the cruise as being the "Discreet types, people who like their privacy." He suggests that the people on the cruise are there for motives other than just pleasure. Tom, Markagh, Paul, and Miriam's father are involved in illegal exchanges. Miriam disguises herself as a man to run away from her past.

Hitler constantly refers to tricks and games, and he speaks about the game of power. Hitler's obsession with games and power is echoed throughout the entire play in the form of chess games, dancing, and the matchstick game. Miriam asks Paul right off the top what his game is, while in fact she is the one playing the game.

Eric Berne, the originator of social game theory, observed that most people would not be able to tolerate continuous intimacy. Therefore, rituals, games, types of behaviour, and even withdrawal serve useful social purposes. However, the compulsion to rely on the drama of social games, as the result of an underdeveloped or damaged capacity for intimacy, can threaten the quality of personal relationships. The games are often complex and can be harmful to the players, but they often continue to play because they feel that they gain psychological benefits.

<u>Matters for discussion</u>

1. How do the characters in the play use games to further their own interests? What are the stakes for each character in his or her game?

2. What do you gain when you win a game? When you lose a game? What do you lose when you win a game?

3. Examine the different kinds of social games played or referred to in the play. What are the different outcomes of each? What are the "psychological benefits" that these characters hope to win when they play their games?

c Freedom

Students could be asked to consider the following pair of definitions in relation to the material of the play:

- Freedom: living under conditions, however narrow or onerous, that you have chosen, or at least consciously accepted

- Confinement: living under conditions, however bountiful, that have been chosen for you, or that you have accepted without thinking

Is it possible to interpret each element of the play in such a way that it relates to one or other of these definitions?

Speeches for Discussion 7

HITLER: And I cannot forget either, The New World haunts me down here. Not what I've done– it is the New World I'm afraid of. I am to blame for what happens next, the people are right to be pulling down my flags and monuments eh? They are right to knock it down, everything I made, I made for vanity, I knew nothing of the future and knew nothing of the past, save failure so - I made failure for all. If I were meant to be the future – that is what would be.

MIRIAM: Were you against the War? You'd be a dissenter if that were the case.

MIRIAM: I grew up with it, with its shadow, it was something that I didn't understand. When I first started reading newspapers, I believed ever word that I read – but I've seen no evidence that it happened. Have you?

MIRIAM: Why should a woman care where the money is coming from, as long as it's there when she needs it?

PAUL: Marriage is a game?

MIRIAM: You wouldn't understand Mr. Wares, you aren't from the same stock - you want to be though.

MIRIAM: Opportunities abound for a man.

TOM: There's an order to all this, to history, it's what I do, to study history. You have to organize it like a schedule, a time line, events happen and subsequent events take place, if you pay attention you can read the patterns.

TOM: My part in history is bigger than being a soldier or just a man, what I am now is so much more than that, I have knowledge. I can reach all the way back through recorded time, we've come marching out of antiquity, from the Egyptians to the Crusades, the Inquisition, to me and I could predict where we were headed.

TOM: The Bomb changed everything, everyone's life. I've been trying to figure out how it all fits together – that now we live in a world that doesn't need soldiers. That the next wars are with us everyday, hanging over our heads like a roof that spans the oceans – I'm going to help people understand that.

MIRIAM: I have a life, saved up, a new life. Maybe saved up isn't the right word, I have a plan. I saw the Amitabha tonight, I saw my chance to be reborn and I took it, I'm going to – go.

MIRIAM: I am. I'm Errol Flynn. I can find adventure, any kind that I like. I have—confidence. My mother says, "Find a nice man before you get too wrinkly." I say, "I don't care! Bring on the crow's feet! ". She says, "Sit up straight dear." I don't want to sit up straight, I want to sit with my legs spread far apart and spit into a fire that I built with my own hands. Freedom. That's what I want, freedom, it means more to me than anything, I have to find my own cathedrals.

MARKAGH: Let a lady wear a suit. Let a lady do whatever she wants. After all what happened, the rules have changed, haven't they?

MARKAGH: Well I'm part and parcel to that, I am the evidence of his thesis! His, 'exhibit A'. The perfect soldier, that's me, but here's the pick of punch girl, I have no war now. So what's a handsome fella to do with himself?

STALIN: Soon there will be more who share my appetites. We will eat everything in sight and dance around what's left.

TRUMAN: You think this is a dance contest or something? The last couple standing?

TRUMAN: Sometimes you have to put your foot down and let people know that enough is enough.

STALIN: "There is an ocean between us, how will he know what I'm doing?" I know what you are doing, I have eyes all over and I see you, building your tall towers so you can look all the way across the world.

Final Review 8

1. Write a play review.

2. Which character made the strongest impression on you and why?

3. Plays may be written to instruct, educate, entertain or a combination of these. Which applies to this play and why?

4. Provide two reasons to either recommend or discourage others from seeing this play.