



**A Guide for Teachers and Students to Company One's Production:  
Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo**

Dear Educators and Students,

We are pleased to present to you our Education Packet for Company One's production of Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo. We've developed these materials to facilitate your understanding and engagement with the production and we encourage you to adapt the material to suit your needs. Bengal Tiger is an adult play with sexual content, violence and swearing. This education packet reflects the adult content of the play and we trust you to use your judgment when deciding on the appropriateness of its content and activities for your students.

Enclosed you will find:

- \* Message from C1
- \* Background Information
- \* Interview with the author, Rajiv Joseph
- \* Lesson plans
- \* Discussion questions

If you have any questions, please contact us at [stageone@companyone.org](mailto:stageone@companyone.org).

See you at the theater!

## **Introduction**

One way to think about art is that it's something which helps us explore our place in the world and how we feel about it; Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo certainly encourages us to do that. It is not a history play, nor a play about religion, morality, war or philosophy but a play so wide-reaching and ambitious in its scope that all an education packet like this one can do is to provide some background information and a starting point for discussion.

One question Bengal Tiger explores is how much choice, control and responsibility we have over our actions and their implications. Bengal Tiger is set in a war zone. In war, it's never one individual versus another; it's a country versus country or ideology versus ideology. Usually, decisions are made by governments, presidents, kings or generals, and these are passed on as commands to soldiers. In this situation, are people personally responsible for their actions? If it's someone's job or in their nature to kill, can we cast moral judgments on them? Ethically, what is a soldiers' place in the world?

In Bengal Tiger, we watch people and animals trying to answer these questions and make sense of their existence. They ask what death means and what life is all about. Ostensibly, they don't get answers; but, as Musa says, "*God has spoken. This world. This is what He's said.*" The characters are forced to interpret data, signs and symbols. Interpretation will always be a version of something and not the thing itself. When a person translates from one language to another, information is inevitably lost or corrupted, while sometimes it is not even possible to translate something at all. Even when something is spoken in our own language, our interpretation, our understanding of what they say will be colored by our own experiences and personality. Your interpretation and understanding of this play will be different from everyone else's and it will be valuable. Please use this packet not only to enhance your understanding, but also as a starting place for discussion, so you have the chance to hear what other people took away from this production.

We live in an age in which countries and their people are increasingly dependent on each other; we are dependent on foreign countries for everything from food and fuel to workforce. More than ever before, we have opportunities to hear from people and cultures from all over the world. We also have the opportunity to inflict violence on countries thousands of miles away, quickly and catastrophically. Sometimes, it feels that we are closer than ever to understanding and caring for cultures very different to our own, while at other times as if we've never been further from this. Currently, there are tensions between European countries as a result of the economic crisis; conflict in Syria about who has the right to rule, with Turkey growing increasingly concerned about the proximity of violence; there's the potential of violence between Israel and Iran; tensions ran high between American and Pakistan after the release of an Islamophobic film. In each case, the opposing parties believe and state that they are in the right. Perhaps there has never been a time in history when it's more important that we listen to each other — listen, reflect and try to understand.

## **Background Information**

Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo repeatedly references historical figures and events, and is permeated with religious concepts. To aid your understanding of the play and exploration of its themes and questions, we've included some background information on key issues.

### **The Iraq War**

The action of Bengal Tiger takes place in Baghdad —the capital of Iraq—in 2003, during the Iraq War (sometimes called the Second Gulf War). Saddam Hussein was the President of Iraq from 16 July 1979 until 9 April 2003.

Some forty countries, collectively known as the coalition forces, went to war with Iraq on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2003. The main bulk of the forces were supplied by the US and UK but there were also Australian, Polish and other forces involved. The primary reason for the invasion, offered by US President George Bush and coalition supporters, was the allegation that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD). US officials argued



that Iraq posed an immediate threat to the United States. This was the second time in the space of 12 years America used military force against Iraq; George W H Bush (George Bush's father) had ordered military action against Iraq in 1991.

The coalition invasion used land, air and water assaults, moving methodically through Iraq until the coalition forces finally achieved their goal of controlling most of the large cities. It was 15th April 2003 when the invasion was declared complete.

Coalition forces then began to search for and capture all government figures from the Saddam regime. Saddam was captured December 2003. On November 5<sup>th</sup> 2006, he was convicted of charges related to the 1982 killing of 148 Iraqis and was hanged on December 30<sup>th</sup>. He was widely condemned for the brutality of his dictatorship.

## The Husseins:



Two of Saddam Hussein's sons appear in Bengal Tiger, Uday (left) and Qusay Hussein (right). On 22 July 2003, the coalition forces raided a home in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. During the raid, Uday, and Qusay were killed.

**Uday Hussein** (18 June 1964 – 22 July 2003) was originally Saddam's favorite son. However, he fell out of his father's favor due to his wild and erratic behavior. He was widely known to be paranoid and violent, and would torture anyone who disappointed or displeased him including friends and girlfriends. Allegations against him include looting, murder, beating an officer to death and attempted assassination. He was also known for his sexual brutality and is alleged to have kidnapped and raped numerous Iraqi women. His mansion in Baghdad was said to house a personal zoo stocked with lions and cheetahs; an underground parking garage for his collection of luxury cars; Cuban cigars; and millions of dollars' worth of fine wines, liquor and heroin. Uday seemed proud of his reputation and called himself *abu sarh*, Arabic for "wolf".

**Qusay Hussein** (17 May 1966 – 22 July 2003), though younger than Uday, was appointed to be Saddam's heir. Little information is known about Qusay, politically or personally, as he kept a low profile.

## Military Life and mental health

The US Armed Forces consists of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard and is one of the largest in the world. Kev and Tom, the two American military men in Bengal Tiger, are marines. Put together, the United States constitutes roughly 43 percent of the world's military expenditures. The U.S. armed forces as a whole possess large quantities of advanced and powerful equipment, along with widespread placement of forces around the world, giving them significant power both to defend and attack.

**Mental health:** It has recently been reported that mental health problems send more men in the U.S. military to the hospital than any other cause. Between 2003-8, the number



of incidents of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) increased six fold. PTSD is a severe anxiety disorder, which results from experiencing extreme psychological trauma, which produces powerful feelings of fear, helplessness or horror. Symptoms include re-experiencing the original trauma(s), avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma, sleeping problems, anger, and hyper-vigilance. Other mental health problems commonly experiences by military personnel include depression, bi-polar disorder, alcohol dependence and substance abuse.

**Gulf War Syndrome** is the term used to describe a cluster of chronic symptoms affecting Gulf War Veterans, which are not easily explained medically. Symptoms include: fatigue, headaches, joint pain, fever, indigestion, insomnia, dizziness, respiratory disorders, and memory problems.

**Suicide:** the suicide rate in the American military is twice as high as in the civilian population. Since 2003, more military personnel have died from suicide than from battlefield fatalities.

### **Religion, God and the after-life:**

Many of the characters in Bengal Tiger try to find meaning in life and in death, often looking to religion for answers. 97% of Iraqis are Muslim.

**Islam and God:** Muslims believe that God is one, there is only one God and that God is incomparable; for Muslims, the purpose of life is to love and serve God. Muslims believe that Islam is the complete version of a faith that was revealed multiple times through history, including through Abraham, Moses and Jesus, whom Muslims consider prophets. In Islam, God is beyond human understanding and so he is not visualized. God is understood to be a



personal god in the sense that an individual can commune directly with God, and God will respond whenever a person in need or distress calls him. Allah is Arabic for God.

**Islam and translation:** The Qur'an (the Holy Book) is held to be the direct word of God. Consequently, the Qur'an is only perfect when recited in Arabic, as translating/interpreting it introduce human error and bias. Translations of the Qur'an are held to be commentaries on it but not the Qur'an itself.



**Islam creation and free will:** Muslims believe that creation of everything in the universe is brought into being by Allah's command. According to Muslim theologians, although events are pre-ordained, humans have free will and the faculty to choose between right and wrong. Therefore humans are deemed responsible for their actions.

**Animals in Islam:** The Qur'an entreats Muslims to treat animals with compassion in part because animals are believed to praise Allah, though not in human language.

**Life after death:** In Islam, the afterlife is the starting-point of further progress for humankind. People in paradise are progressing through ever higher stages of knowledge and perfection of faith. Meanwhile, hell is seen by some as a place of progress where souls are instructed and purified until they are ready to go to heaven. Some Muslim commentators have argued that hell will be empty eventually because Allah has the power rescue people from hell and Allah is merciful.

Muslims that die as Martyrs go straight to the Garden of Eden; their spirits do not return to their mutilated bodies. In Islam, a martyr is anyone whose death involved great physical suffering, including dying in a fire, by drowning or a collapsing building.

If you don't die a martyr, between death and burial, your spirit makes a quick journey to heaven and hell. Then, right before earth is piled on top of the corpse, the spirit returns to dwell in the body. Two angels come and question the dead person, and if they find that their faith is pure and life sinless, the grave is turned into a spacious, comfortable space. If their life was sinful, then the weight of the earth crushes the sentient corpse causing torturous pain. In comfort or in pain, the person then waits until the final judgment.

### **Paradise and Gardens**



Paradise is usually thought of as a home for the righteous dead. Gardens play an important part in notions of paradise. In Christianity and Judaism, paradise is often imagined as a restoration of the Garden of Eden, where animals and humans lived in perfect harmony and didn't eat each other. In Islam, similarly, paradise is depicted as a garden of pleasure and joy.

## **Existentialism**

Existentialism is a philosophical and cultural movement, which holds that the starting point for all philosophical questioning must be the individual's experiences. The individual is responsible for giving or finding meaning in their life and creating their own values. Furthermore, most existentialists believe that an individual is defined by the way they act and that they are responsible for and choose their actions.

## Sowing Fields of Questions

### **A Conversation with Rajiv Joseph**

*Playwright Rajiv Joseph chatted with Company One's Director of New Work, Ilana Brownstein, about the developmental path of the script, questions of existence, and what it means to tell this story now.*

**BENGAL TIGER AT THE BAGHDAD ZOO had a remarkable development process, beginning with a stint at the Lark Play Development Center in New York in 2007, and a playwright exchange program that brought the play to Mexico. It then moved on to full productions at The Kirk Douglas Theatre in 2009, and the Mark Taper Forum in 2010. Both of these LA productions had essentially the same casts and creative teams, and were led by noted director/playwright Moisés Kaufman (THE LARAMIE PROJECT; THE THREE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE). In 2011, it debuted on Broadway. You were working on the script throughout that process, and the first published version is actually different than the revised version we have. Can you talk about the shifts you discovered during this process?**

I had been working on *BENGAL TIGER* for 4 years prior to its first production. It's a complex play and one that doesn't have an easily determined ending. I was playing around with lots of different things, and discovering the kind of world I was creating as I went along. In that first production, there was a lot that was unfinished. This is where the direction of Moisés Kaufman was really helpful. Because he's also a writer, the questions he asked about the script were extremely useful. He'd say, if you can't answer these questions, then you have work to do tonight. So I was working every night, late hours, figuring things out, rewriting scenes, and the play really took off. But even as it started at the Kirk Douglas, for the first 5 or 6 previews we had a different ending every night. Literally, the actors would come on stage with new pages in their hands, because they had just gotten them. At a certain point we froze it, but in the course of rehearsing for the 2<sup>nd</sup> production, every day I'd bring in two or three new options. The actors would read it, we'd all discuss it with Moisés. At that point we were very close as a company and we all had a kind of mutual investment in this play, and so I was happy to hear everyone's ideas. I found the right balance in those final scenes. By the time it went to Broadway, I changed very little. For me, this was one of the most supportive development processes I've experienced.



**The play asks a lot of questions and provides very few answers, and I find that it invites us to wrestle with these questions, existentially. What's most interesting to me is that this is by design, and that it took you several years of working intimately with the play to strike that balance.**

Part of the reason I like the open-endedness of the final scene is that I find it fascinating to see the different readings that people take from it. What do they consider this play to be about? This is especially important for a play that's so tied to God, and searching for God.

**This is also in some ways a play about Americans at war in a foreign country, and all the complexities that implies. How did you find that balance?**

I had the chance during the process to work with many veterans of the war and with some Iraqi nationals who happened to be living in LA, and who helped me very much with translations. I was happy and relieved to find that the veterans of the Iraq War who saw my play and spoke to me afterwards were moved by it, and felt that I had gotten my notes right. Likewise I felt the same from Iraqi people who saw the play and spoke to me afterwards. It was important that there was an Iraqi story being told, especially on the Broadway stage.

**Was that important because all of these diverse characters are juxtaposed against the enormous questions of existence? What was your journey in the exploration of the religious and spiritual questions?**

That aspect was always going to be there. As soon as I started talking in the voice of a tiger, and a tiger dealing with discoveries, that was going to be headed straight for God – or for spirituality in some sense. I lived for a few years in the Peace Corps in West Africa, Senegal, which is a Muslim country. I became used to the daily prayers, and that became dear to me – the call to prayer, minarets, and Islamic culture. Even though I'm not Muslim, it became very much a part of who I am, and a comforting aspect of my life there. Returning to the US was a culture shock for me – much more so than going to Senegal. I returned about a year before 9/11. The anti-Islamic sentiment that began swelling in this country after that moment (and continues to this day) had a deep impact on me, and those feelings were falling into the play as I wrote. The Tiger's experience with the minarets is similar to mine, and when I started examining that, the first images that were coming to me extrapolated into other things, like gardens, and God, and the Garden of Eden – which is rumored to be in the region of Baghdad initially. I had sown a field of questions of divinity.

**Our production will be opening in a context that not only contains politics and the elections, but also newly re-ignited violence in the Middle East. At the moment you are I are speaking for this interview, the horrendous, anti-Islam video “Innocence of Muslims” has just been released. Do you have any thought about the timing of this play in this moment?**

I certainly do. As the world changes, so does the context of the play. I started it in 2003. And then, finally, the production came around and things had changed – different administration, different policies, different war. News about that video broke in the last week; I don’t know the meaning of it all yet, and neither does anybody really. It’s crazy. There continue to be things done in the Middle East that we think go away, and then they don’t. We’re so surprised that they don’t, so angry. In the play, Uday says as much: “Americans, always thinking that when things die they go away.” That line is very apropos of this moment.

**You’ve talked in past interviews about the particular sort of freedom it gave you as a writer to work with the intricacy and scope of design that was available for your first three productions, all in large theatres. Now, post-Broadway, the play is moving to vastly different spaces. For example, we’re only the fifth production ever, but we’re the most intimate one to date. What are your thoughts as this play moves in ways never part of your original experience?**

I am thrilled. I can’t wait to see this play done in intimate and strange places. I think the effect of it will be much different than it was for the first three productions, and I’m a big fan of that. My ideal space for any play is 200 seats or less. I think the bigger a space gets, the harder it becomes to grapple with theatricality. However, as a young writer who hadn’t seen his stuff realized on a large stage yet, that was important for me. Now I know, I’ve seen it, it did what it did, and now it’s open to go anywhere and do anything. I love that Company One is giving this the most intimate production so far, it’s the start of something new.

*This interview was conducted and written by Ilana Brownstein.*

## **Lesson plan 1: Communication and miscommunication**

In Bengal Tiger, communication is fraught with difficulty, in part because of problems surrounding interpretation, misunderstanding and the challenge of conveying inner experience.

**Materials:** paper, pens, copy of the play

**Goals:** to encourage students to reflect on how we communicate and what enables us to understand each other.



### **Exercises:**

1. Play: draw, write, draw.

This game can be played in groups of 5-10.

All players start with a piece of paper on which they write a sentence. For example, "a women ate a big sandwich in a café", which they don't show to anyone. Everyone then passes their paper to their left. Each person then draws what they read on the piece of paper that they've been passed. They then fold over the sentence so it isn't visible and pass the paper to their left. The next person then writes what they think the picture is showing. This repeats until the paper gets back to the person that wrote the sentence (or until you run out of time!) All players should try in earnest to 'translate' the picture/sentence as accurately as possible.

Discuss how the meanings of the sentences and pictures changed with each person's interpretation. Take time to try and understand how these changes occurred.

### **2. Think about the play, reflect and discuss:**

a) Which characters try and make themselves understood and when? Do they succeed?

b) Think of a time in your life when somebody misunderstood you, or you misunderstood somebody. How and why do you think this misunderstanding occurred? What were the consequences? How did the situation resolve itself?

c) Is there someone in your life who you think is good at understanding you? Why do you think this is?

**3. Research:** conveying the experience of war is long been held as a monumental artistic challenge. Carry out research into other writers, playwrights and painters who have attempted to capture the war experience. Are any especially evocative? What makes them effective?

**4. Perform:** Create a scene between Tom or Kev and a relative/friend back in the USA, in which they are trying to convey their experience in Iraq.

Musa tries to explain to Uday why he shot Tom but fails to do so. Had he been speaking to his best friend or someone else he trusts, what might he have said? Create a scene between Musa and a friend/relative in which he tries to make his reasons understood.

## Lesson plan 2: Tyger, Tyger burning bright

*"What kind of twisted bastard creates a predator and then punishes him for preying?"*

The Tiger

**Materials:** copy of William Blake's poem, The Tyger, paper, pens.

**Goals:** reflect on the functions of animals in art. Create your own characters based on animals.

**Discuss:** why do you think Rajiv Joseph chose to include a Tiger in his play? Can you find any thematic similarities between Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo and Blake's poem, The Tyger?

**Question:** do you think animals are moral beings? If so/not, is it possible for them to be held morally accountable for their behavior?



**Question:** what about humans? How are we different from animals? Can we be moral beings? What do we do when our natural instinct conflicts with our ideas about right and wrong?

**Exercise for 2 or more people:** Rajiv Joseph includes the stage direction about the Tiger, "Tiger wears clothes. Nothing feline about him".

Have a go at creating human-like characters based on animals. Picture an animal in your mind. Try and imagine all the details of the animal, its fingers/toes/flippers, its eyelids, the texture of its skin/fur/scales. How does it move? Smell? What noise does it make? Once you have a clear image step into the animal's body. Try and move as the animal and make sounds. Start interacting with the other 'animals' in the space, noting your animal's reactions to others. Once you really feel the animal in your body, begin slowly to humanize it so that eventually, you appear human even though you still have your animal's energy.

Was there one animal/person you had a strong reaction to? Team up with them and create a scene, set in the bombed out zoo or on the streets of Baghdad.

### Lesson Plan 3: Gardens and ideas of paradise:

The words 'garden' and 'gardener' occur 40 times in this play and much of the action takes place in the 'ruined garden'.

*"I tell her it's God's garden. He likes gardens, see. He tests us in them, he tempts us in them, he builds them up and tears them apart. It's like his fucking hobby."* The Tiger



There are similarities between notions of paradise, which span across cultures and in many descriptions of paradise are laden with pastoral imagery. When used in its religious sense, paradise is imagined as an abode of the virtuous dead. In old Egyptian beliefs, the otherworld is Aaru (left), the reed-fields of ideal hunting and fishing grounds where the dead lived after judgment. In Norse mythology,

a few chosen dead gained access to Asgard (right). For the classical Greeks, Elysian Fields was a paradisiacal land of plenty where the heroic and righteous dead hoped to spend eternity. In the Zoroastrian Avesta, the "Best Existence" and the "House of Song" are places of the righteous dead.



*"Heaven and hell? Those are just metaphorical constructs that represent "hungry" and "not hungry".* The Tiger

**Materials:** paper and pencils (and paint, crayons, collage materials etc. if available)

**Goals:** Explore some of the religious imagery in the play and personal concepts of paradise

**Exercises:** Create hellish or paradisiacal gardens using pencils, pens, collage etc. Present your paradise/hellish land back to your class. What are the similarities and differences between ideas? As a group, are you able to reach a consensus on what a paradisiacal place would be like or not?



**Discuss:** The war has ended and Musa's garden has been restored to its former beauty. What would his reaction be? Would he have re-gained his paradise? Would it be the same?

**Materials:** paper, pens

**Goals:** to explore characters' motivations and setting.

**Exercise:** on your own or in small groups write/perform:

- a) The scene in which Hadia persuades Musa to take her to his garden.
- b) A monologue in which Husa wrestles with himself about whether or not to take Hadia to the garden.
- c) A scene in which two Iraqi civilians find the garden before it was destroyed. What do they make of this paradise in the desert? How would they describe it?



Topiary animals



## Discussion questions:

1. Interpreters are often in a position of having to understand and loyally translate two very different points of view. Do you think seeing multiple points of view give you a clearer picture of the truth or is it confusing?

2. *"I have the truth from both sides American/iraqi so i know who i am....."* taken from blog written by an Iraqi interpreter

*"Off course my sunglasses my best friend, but should be say here, i have a lot of friends like, my mask, my conduct lenses, and their relatives!!!!!! hair style, eyebrow style!!!!!!"* taken from blog written by an Iraqi interpreter

Do you think Musa struggles with his identity? Where do you think his loyalty lies?

3. "Just because it's gone, doesn't mean it's not there", Kev. Why do you think the Tiger, Kev, Uday and Hadia won't go away despite being dead? Why do they still exist for Kev, Tom and Musa?

4. Which characters admit they feel guilty for their actions? How do they protect themselves from these feelings? Where do you think responsibility for death/dismemberment in war situations lies, with soldiers, commanders, the whole nation or no-one?

5. *"When the blades of your shears touched her skin, she burst like a grape."* Uday

*"I don't give a fuck. I'll be like... (He pretends to shoot his machine gun) What's up ostrich, motherfucker? I'll kill you, bitch!"* Kev

A number of characters use very informal, rude or metaphorical language to describe violent acts. What effect does using this language have? What does it say about the characters?

6. Musa repeatedly complains that Tom/Kev aren't listening to him. Why don't they listen? What prevents them from listening and understanding Musa?

7. Do any of the characters make assumptions about others based on stereotypes? What are these stereotypes? Where do you think they get these stereotypes from?

## **Bibliography:**

*A large amount of the information in this packet has been drawn from a variety of Wikipedia pages.*

*This website has a useful timeline of the Iraq War: [thinkprogress.org/report/iraq-timeline/](http://thinkprogress.org/report/iraq-timeline/)*

*For information on Islam, see: [Muslim.org](http://Muslim.org)*

*For information on life after death in Islam, take a look at this New York Times article: [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/04/opinion/04iht-edhalevi.1.5565834.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/04/opinion/04iht-edhalevi.1.5565834.html?_r=1&)*