Welcome to the Wheelock Family Theatre’s production of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dwayne Hartford’s brilliant new adaptation brings to vivid life Charles Dickens’s classic tale of rich and poor, love and hate, selfishness and sacrifice, vengeance and justice, chaos and redemption. It is both the story of a single family held together by the golden thread of love, and of an entire society torn apart by the darkness of arrogance and hatred. And it raises complex questions about right and wrong that we struggle to answer even today. We hope you will be thrilled, challenged, and inspired by our production, and that the following guide will prove helpful in class discussions and activities.

- Charles Dickens, 1812-1870. *A Tale of Two Cities* was published in weekly installments in the literary periodical *All the Year Round* from April to November 1859. His sources included the play “The Frozen Deep” by Wilkie Collins and, especially, Thomas Carlyle’s 1837 work *The French Revolution*.

- This adaptation of *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Dwayne Hartford, premiered in 2008 at Childsplay, Inc., in Tempe, Arizona, where Hartford is a longtime member and artistic administrator. He has also published the plays *Eric and Elliot* and *The Imaginators*. 
plot summary

The action takes place during the second half of the 18th century. The play begins in flashback, as Dr. Manette encounters the brutal and arrogant nobles of the Evrémonde family. Many years later, in 1775, Dr. Manette, who has been imprisoned all this time (18 years), is released to the Defarge home in Paris. Although he is weakened in mind and body, he is “recalled to life” by the sight of his daughter Lucie, who takes him home to London to care for him.

Five years later, Charles Darnay is on trial for treason. Lucie is one of the prosecution witnesses called to testify, which she reluctantly does. Things look bad for Charles until his lawyer’s assistant, Sydney Carton, points out that he looks like Darnay, and therefore the main witness cannot be sure of Darnay’s identity. Darnay and Carton both fall in love with Lucie, but she chooses Darnay. Despite his disappointment and his cynicism about himself and the way his life has gone, Sydney pledges loyalty to Lucie and says that if she ever needs help, he will do all he can for her.

Charles reveals to Dr. Manette that he is the heir to the Evrémonde estates, but he does not act on this fact until a former servant, Gabelle, asks for his help. When he returns to France, Charles renounces his noble rights but is nonetheless arrested and imprisoned. Dr. Manette, Lucie, servant Miss Pross, and family lawyer Mr. Lorry all follow to try to gain his release.

Meanwhile, the French peasants, more and more outraged at the behavior of the nobles toward them, come ever closer to revolution as Madame Defarge knits their names and offenses into a garment of doom. After the fall of the Bastille, she makes it clear that not only those guilty of specific crimes but also every person with noble blood will have to die to satisfy her need for revenge.

At the French trial, Dr. Manette nearly succeeds in arguing for Charles’s release, until Defarge produces a document, written many years earlier while Dr. Manette was in prison, denouncing all members of the Evrémonde family line. Charles is sentenced to die. Madame Defarge, in her fanatic desire for blood, decides Lucie and their child should die too, and only through Miss Pross’s heroic efforts is Lucie saved and Madame Defarge killed.

Sydney Carton has also come to Paris. He resolves to save Charles to honor his promise to Lucie. He makes arrangements for the family to leave France, drugs Charles in his prison cell, and takes his place. As he steps to the guillotine and his death, he finds satisfaction in the one truly good deed of his life.
Who Isn’t Here? What Doesn’t Happen?

If your class has read the novel before seeing the play, tell them that a number of the novel’s characters and plot lines will be omitted from the play.

- Predict which ones they will/should be, and decide why they are the best ones to go.
- After seeing the play, compare the class’s choices with the playwright’s.
- Write: 1) a letter to the playwright, arguing for one character or event that should have been allowed to stay, or 2) a scene that should have been included.

**a tale of twos**

This play is built on opposites, both of theme and character. By discussing characters in pairs, students may be able to see those oppositions and also find complexities beyond them. For example,

Lucie and Madame Defarge could be compared in many aspects, including:
- Light vs. dark – personal, symbolic, thematic (“Lucie” comes from the Latin *lux*, meaning “light”)
- Gender and power roles – activity or passivity, direct or indirect power, love and compassion or hatred, domestic or societal goals
- Understanding of guilt, innocence, justified means to an end, crime and punishment

Other pairs to consider for discussion, debate, or writing:
- Sydney/Darnay
- Dr. Manette/Madame Defarge or the Marquis
- Mr. Lorry/Miss Pross
- Mr. Lorry and Miss Pross/Monsieur Defarge and Gaspard

More suggestions for activities based on character:
- Role-play or write one or more sessions between Sydney Carton and his (modern-day) psychiatrist. Explore the origins of Carton’s self-disgust and his refusal to try for success or happiness. What are the voices he hears?
- Imagine and describe a modern-day story line for Dr. Manette. Would he still be a doctor today? If not, what might be his profession? What unjust authorities might he feel compelled to defy? What kind of punishment might he have to endure? What activity might he undertake as a way of surviving? Who would come to his aid?
Imagine Miss Pross as a friend of Lucie’s, perhaps her neighbor (or BFF?), in modern-day Boston. How would their relationship develop? Imagine day-to-day activities they might share. Would moments of comedy/humor form part of their relationship? From whom would Miss Pross want to defend Lucie, and how would Lucie respond?

Place Madame Defarge in the modern world. What oppression or injustice would she be rebelling against? Her knitting is an allusion to the classical Fates, who wove the story of each person’s life into a tapestry he or she was powerless to change. How would she accomplish that role today? Explain the relationship between her idea of her own destiny and her dying words. “No. It is absurd.”

Create a drawing, painting, or collage that reveals the nature of one of the characters, or the relationship between two or more of them. Or draw Madame Defarge’s knitted record of wrongs.

Tell the story of a character, or retell a scene from the play, in the form of a poem, story, or song.

Imagine a shelf that contains objects, each of which represents a character. What object would it be for each person, and why?

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**the big ideas**

Like all Dickens stories, *A Tale of Two Cities* contains multiple themes not only as they affect the story but as they resonate today. Choose from among the following for discussion or writing.

**Issues of social class**

- What picture does the play present of the French nobility? What actions that they take seem particularly outrageous? What unacceptable assumptions underlie those actions? Should the revolution have spared a “good” nobleman, like Charles?

- Does this story present parallels with people of privilege—whether through hereditary position or accumulated wealth—today? Are there still people, in other words, who think they can get away with such cruel behavior and dismissive attitudes? If so, who are they, and who are their targets? Explain and give examples. What can be done to fight them?
How does the play present ordinary citizens, as represented by the spectators at both the English and the French trials? Should we be critical, amused, or angry at them? What about the peasants that storm the Bastille—do they behave the way we want them to? How does the story shape your feelings about mob rule?

What is the role of the educated, professional class in the play, as represented by Dr. Manette, Stryver, Darnay, and Carton? Is their benign but still powerful position necessary to control the citizenry? Comment on Carton’s remark that “the English need order—whether it is just or not.”

Why do the French citizens begin making jokes about the guillotine, calling it “The Barber,” “the National Razor,” and saying it is a fine cure for a headache or for hair that’s turning gray? Have you heard or made jokes about similarly grim situations? Why are they both appalling and appealing?

How difficult is it for those without power to rebel against the powerful? Consider Madame Defarge’s response when her husband wonders why he stopped Gaspard from killing the Marquis: “You were afraid. You still think of them as masters and betters. We have to think differently. It takes time. But it’s coming—soon.” What modern parallels of oppressed or disadvantaged groups can you think of? What directions do you think their future will take? Have there been times in your own life when you had to rethink your vision of yourself, in order to move ahead? Explain and share your ideas.

**The power of love**

In the end, despite all the hatred and suffering, love makes the difference. Most of the variations on love show its power to ennoble, save, defend, transform, and resurrect.

- Discuss some of the most important moments of tenderness, compassion, loyalty, and passion. Which ones feel most powerful and real?

- How does heroic sacrifice arise from love? Why is it not necessarily the people one would expect who do the most out of love?

- When loved ones are harmed, love can turn to bitterness, hatred, and the desire to destroy. Are crimes justified if they are committed in the name of a wronged loved one?

- What about violence committed for the love of a noble cause? What examples in today’s society can you think of? What is your response?

**Rights, wrongs, crimes, and punishment**

- What is the difference between justice and vengeance? Do you support the idea of violence in support of eliminating an injustice? How far would you be willing to go?
Trial by jury: is justice served? Darnay is innocent of wrongdoing in both trials, yet he’s freed by a trick in the first and declared guilty by a sort of trick in the second. What are we to conclude about this way of deciding right and wrong? Why does it sometimes seem that guilt is easier to establish than innocence?

Madame Defarge believes in absolutes—no second chances or extenuating circumstances. Are there situations in society where this is still true? If so, what and where? If not, why have we changed? She also believes in guilt by association, to the last member of the family line—exactly like the Marquis when he threatens to hang all of Gabelle’s family. Discuss this irony.

Is *A Tale of Two Cities* essentially an optimistic or a pessimistic story? Explain.

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**staging the play**

Playwright Dwayne Hartford has specified wonderfully creative ideas in set, sound, and lighting design, drawing us in emotionally from the very first moment of the production.

**Set design**
- What is the advantage of having each scene indicated with changing set pieces while the background structure remains the same?
- The playwright’s multilevel set design, with galleries surrounding the main acting area, both suggests multiple locations and emphasizes important themes: levels of society, for example, or the relationship between those who watch (including us) and those who participate.

**Sound design**
- Why is it so emotionally compelling to start the play with sound rather than sight? Explain the effect on you of the sound of knitting needles followed by the crash of the guillotine blade. Did you recognize the sounds right away?
- Important sounds in the play include the knitting needles, the courtroom gavel or bell, the tap of the shoemaker’s hammer, rain, footsteps, and galloping horses. How are these sounds related, and what does each represent?
- Overall, how does the sound affect the way you respond to and understand the story?
**Lighting design**

- How did lighting help you understand plot or character? How did the play use darkness in a creative and effective way? How important was color?
- What is the relationship between lighting and set design? What moment was made most effective by the way it was lighted?

**Costume design**

- How well did the costumes help you understand the personality and social class of the principal characters? Which ones seemed particularly effective? Why? Were there any costume surprises?
- Since many of the actors played more than one role, how did costuming help you understand the difference?

**your tale of two cities**

- What ideas will you remember from this play?
- What was the strongest emotion that the play created in you? When and why?
- Which character affected you most deeply? Why?
- Would you rather play Lucie or Madame Defarge? Sydney or Charles? The Marquis or Dr. Manette? Explain.
- What one change in casting, costuming, or set design might you make? Why?