



milwaukee**chamber**theatre

Study Guide for A THOUSAND WORDS

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Please contact us if you have questions
about this Study Guide or if we can assist
you in any other way.

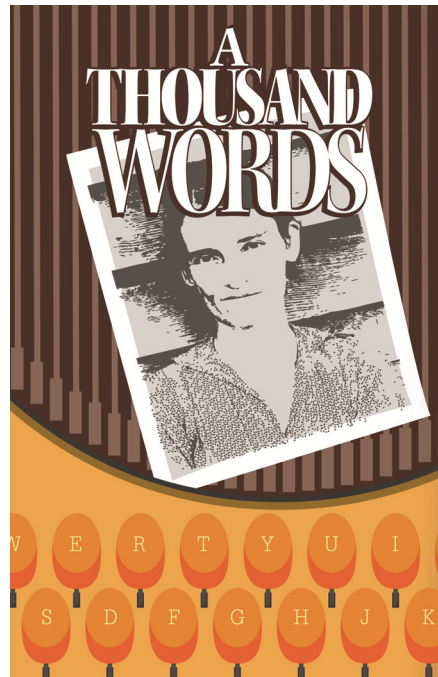
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A production
in
collaboration
with



By Gwendolyn Rice
Directed by Jennifer Uphoff Gray

Production Dates:
February 16 – March 11, 2012

*The education programs for this production
at Milwaukee Chamber Theatre received
generous support from:*

**Sheldon and Marianne Lubar
Charitable Fund**

An Interview with Playwright Gwendolyn Rice

By Becky Kover, Marketing Intern

Becky Kover: How did you get involved in writing plays?

Gwendolyn Rice: I was involved in theatre as an actor when I was younger, and I have a pretty good ear for dialogue. I also loved creative writing, and started out writing a lot of short stories.

BK: What was your inspiration for the plot of A THOUSAND WORDS?

GR: I read a newspaper account when the photos were found amongst Hemingway's possessions in 2004. I had never heard of Walker Evans, but the story really intrigued me. I started doing some reading about him, about his photography, and also about Cuba in the 1930s. Originally I imagined setting the play in a bar in Havana, with Ernest Hemingway and Walker Evans as characters, literally explaining how the two met, who was pictured in the photos, and why it was important. When that story didn't "gel" I started thinking about it from a completely different point of view. That's when I came up with Shirley and the museum angle.

BK: A THOUSAND WORDS combines many different worlds: photography, marketing agencies, small-town Kansas. How did you research these different aspects and what was it like fusing so many settings together?

GR: I really like weaving together disparate stories, so combining a lot of elements was very natural to me. Some of the subjects I knew a lot about. And some I really had to research.

Regarding life in a marketing agency, I've worked in marketing departments most of my professional life (some for arts and cultural organizations, some in the for-profit world). I have a great deal of respect for creative professionals who use the minimum of words and images to sell . . . anything and everything. It's an art unto itself, and an interesting, inherently manipulative field.

I've actually never been to Kansas, but I grew up in rural Wisconsin, so I have a good understanding of the small-town mindset. Also, I have a friend who did his doctoral research in Kansas and he gave me some pretty funny reports of life on the Plains. It seemed like an environment I could relate to.

I have several friends who are professional photographers and I've been involved on the periphery of photo shoots (okay, once I was a hand model when the "talent" didn't show up) but I have very little knowledge of the visual arts. I read a lot about the evolution of photography styles in the early twentieth century, and a bit about the equipment, so I could make Walker's explanation of his work authentic.



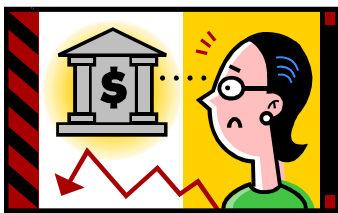
Pre-show Questions

1. Before looking at the timeline on the following pages of this study guide, talk about anything you know, or think you know, about the Great Depression. Why did it happen? Who did it affect? What steps were taken by the government to correct the economic disaster?
2. Most people would agree that taking pictures has long been an important part of documenting life experiences. And since the advent of cell phones with cameras and the allure of posting on Facebook, we probably take even more pictures than ever before. Talk about why a photo is such an evocative way to record a moment in time.
3. Not only does *A THOUSAND WORDS*, by Gwendolyn Rice, move between two different periods in time, it also includes several locations in both the contemporary scenes and the scenes during the 1930s. The production is being staged in our studio theatre, which includes only 99 seats and a fairly small playing space. Also, it is coming to us from Forward Theater in Madison, which means the design has to move from one place to another. Talk about how all the designers might work together to create so many different times and places for the audience. It might be fun to record your ideas so that after you've seen the show you can compare them to what the designers actually did.



Great Depression Timeline

Resources: www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline
FDR'S Alphabet Soup: New Deal America, 1932-1939 by Tonya Bolden, 2010



October 1929: The stock market crashes, marking the end of six years of unparalleled prosperity for most sectors of the American economy. The "crash" begins on October 24 (Black Thursday). By October 29, stock prices will plummet and banks will be calling in loans. An estimated \$30 billion in stock values will "disappear" by mid-November.

March 1930: More than 3.2 million people are unemployed, up from 1.5 million before the crash. This meant that one in every three American workers was without a job.

December 1931: New York's Bank of the United States collapses. At the time of the collapse, the bank had over \$200 million in deposits, making it the largest single bank failure in the nation's history.

November 1932: Franklin Delano Roosevelt is elected president in a landslide over Herbert Hoover.



March 12, 1933: FDR delivers the first of what came to be known as his "fireside chats." In his initial "chat" he appeals to the nation to join him in "banishing fear."

October 1933: The Civil Works Administration (CWA) is established. Devised as a wide scale program that could employ up to 4 million people, the CWA is involved in the building of bridges, schools, hospitals, airports, parks and playgrounds. Additionally, funds go toward the repair and construction of highways and roads. Early in 1934, Congress will authorize \$950 million for the continued operation of the CWA.

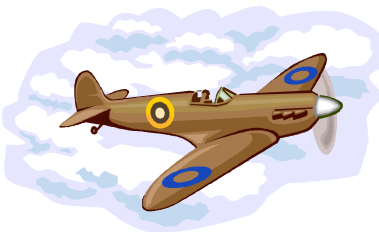
April 1935: FDR signs legislation creating the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Its name would be changed in 1939 to the Work Projects Administration. The program employs more than 8.5 million individuals across the nation. These individuals, drawing a salary of only \$41.57 a month, will improve or create highways, roads, bridges, and airports. In addition, the WPA will put thousands of artists -- writers, painters, theater directors, and sculptors -- to work on various projects. The WPA will remain in existence until 1943.

1935-1943: **Walker Evans** and many other photographers will produce more than a quarter million images of American rural and urban life.

June 1935: The National Youth Administration is set up to address the needs of young men and women. The NYA works on two levels: a student-work program and an out-of-school program. The student-work program provides odd jobs that pay them enough to stay in school. The out-of-school program sets young people up with various jobs ranging from house painting to cleaning local parks, and eventually comes to include vocational training. President Roosevelt promises that the new agency would "administer aid to young people without discrimination, so that it reached blacks as well as whites, girls as well as boys." (Freedman, p. 50)

July 1937: The Farm Security Administration (FSA) to combat rural poverty is established by an act of congress.

November 1940: Franklin Roosevelt is elected to an unprecedented third term as president.



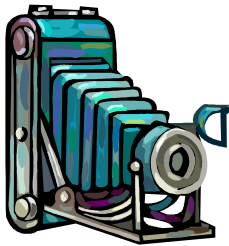
In little over a year, following Japan's December 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor, the U.S. will enter the war in the Pacific and in Europe. The war effort will jump-start U.S. industry and effectively end the Great Depression.

An Abbreviated Walker Evans Biography

Compiled by Jacque Troy; Education Director/Literary Manager

1903: Born in St. Louis, Missouri. His parents are well-off, puritanical; his father is an advertising director. He spends his youth in Toledo, Chicago, and New York City.

1922: Graduates from the Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. Studies literature at Williams College (one year), then takes various jobs in New York City. **“His natural restlessness was clearly aggravated by vague artistic impulses, because he took himself off to Paris, nominally to audit classes at the Sorbonne but actually to read on his own in French literature. He lived the life of a bohemian expatriate on a small allowance from his father....He wanted desperately to become a writer.”** (Aperture, pp. 5-6)



1927: Returns to New York. He is a clerk for a stock brokerage on Wall Street (until 1929).

1928: First photographs with a small hand-held, roll-film camera. **“Evans came to photography...with a poet’s vision and prizefighter’s appetite for contact—attributes which defined his photographic style almost from the beginning.”** (Aperture, p. 6)

1930: First publication of three photographs (Brooklyn Bridge) in the poetry book The Bridge, by Hart Crane.

1933: Photographic expedition to Havana during the political unrest in Cuba with commission to provide illustrations for Carleton Beals' book The Crime of Cuba. Encounter with Ernest Hemingway. **“Even these images, of a truly desperate poverty accord their subjects a distance and dignity that remains almost without parallel among photographic documents of human misery.”** (Aperture, p. 8)

1935: Hired to photograph examples of both run-down homes and the new government-funded housing. Critique of this work as late as 2009 declared, **“There is no single work of art or literature that summarizes the deep concern with poverty in the 1930s....The work of documentary photographers like Walker Evans may come the closest, in part because the unvarnished humanity of their subjects seemed to transcend its historical moment.”** (Dickstein, p. 174)

1936: Travels with famous author, James Agee, to photograph tenant farmers in their homes and fields. Though intended for an article in *Fortune* magazine, so engrossing was the work that it became a book published in 1941 titled, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

1938: Received the high honor of being the first photographer to have a one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Walker Evans was 35.

Resources: <http://xroads.virginia.edu>
Walker Evans, edited by Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1993
Walker Evans: Photographer of America by Thomas Nau, 2007

Pre-show Explorations

1. Langston Hughes wrote the poem included below several years prior to the Great Depression. It beautifully captures the cruel divide between rich and poor.

God to Hungry Child by Langston Hughes

**Hungry child,
I didn't make this world for you.
You didn't buy any stock in my railroad.
You didn't invest in my corporation.
Where are your shares in Standard Oil?
I made the world for the rich
And the will-be-rich
And the have-always been rich.
Not for you,
Hungry child.**



As recorded in the interview on the first page of this study guide, Gwendolyn Rice wrote A THOUSAND WORDS after reading a newspaper article about some Walker Evans photographs. In that same spirit of inspiration from another literary source, use Hughes' poem and work with a partner to create a short scene with dialogue. Though the poet has God talking to a hungry child, remember that you can take any kind of creative license you'd like to generate a scene. Has a wealthy person stopped to taunt the child? Is a kindly soul trying to get him/her to seek help? You decide. When you've completed your scene, share all of them aloud in class so you can get a sense of how source material can be interpreted in a huge number of ways. (*English, Creative Writing*)



1. During the Great Depression, many young people wrote letters to the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, about their desperate situations. Many are collected in the book, Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Letters from Children of the Great Depression, edited by Robert Cohen. Draft a letter to current first lady, Michelle Obama, sharing your opinions about hardships in the United States, that you believe deserve the government's attention. The letter does not need to reflect anything that you are personally experiencing, but only address a concern you have about the country. (*Current Events, English*)

2. Currently, the minimum wage in Wisconsin is \$7.25/hour. In a single income household, with the adult working 40 hours a week, what is the annual income she/he brings home before taxes? _____



Study the table below, which includes prices for basic necessities and luxury items during the Great Depression.
(Math)

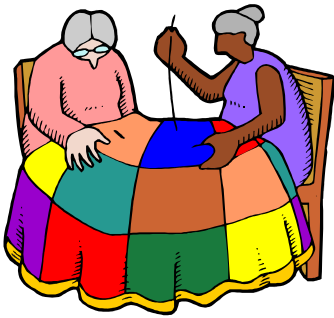
- With a 2012 salary, how “wealthy” would you have been by 1930s standards?
- Given the annual earnings for depression era workers listed in the far right column, who would be able to afford a comfortable life during this period?
- Research and record current prices for each of these items. How much does the minimum wage annual salary comfortably cover in terms of expenses?

Resource: Children of the Great Depression by Russell Freedman, 2005

Item	Great Depression Price	Current Price	Annual Earnings During Depression
Milk	\$0.10		Steelworker \$422
Gasoline	\$0.18/gallon		Waitress \$580
Toothpaste	\$0.25		Coal Miner \$723
Basketball	\$1.00		Construction Worker \$907
Camera	\$2.50		Secretary \$1,040
Bicycle	\$10.95		Teacher \$1,227
Rent	\$31.00/month	\$650.00/month avg.	Stewardess \$1,500
New Pontiac coupe (luxury car)	\$585.00		Doctor \$3,382

Post-show Questions

1. Talk about all the ways the designers found to address the many times, locations and people in this play. Consider how designers in different areas (set, lights, props, sound, costumes) worked together to create an artistic impression. Compare their work to the ideas you developed prior to seeing the show. What did you most admire about the designers' work? What would you like to have seen done differently?
2. Clearly Walker Evans is an important force in both the 1930s and the contemporary storyline. What other interesting themes or ideas came into focus because the playwright chose to explore the past and present simultaneously?



3. Discuss what you think this play is saying about “art”: aesthetically, as a commodity, and as a reflection of society. Remember, the play explored not only Walker Evans’ photographs, but also journalism, the connection to famous writer Ernest Hemingway and community quilting. Considering how each of these artistic aspects was treated may help you reach some conclusions. Share whether you agree with the play’s assertions about this topic and why.

Post-show Explorations

1. Photographer Walker Evans often insisted that his work was “pure record not propaganda....No politics whatever.” Spend some time looking at photographs taken by Walker Evans. Decide whether you agree or disagree with his assertion. Create a collage of representative samples that you believe support your opinion and present your case to your classmates. (*Speech, Visual Art, History*)
2. Here’s a challenge worthy of Walker Evans himself. If you have access to a camera, explore your own neighborhood or school community through its lens. Think about the line our playwright wrote for Evans in Act I, Scene 6: “**When I take her picture, there’s no pity. I’m not poking fun. There’s just . . . fascination. Admiration. Sometimes astonishment, if I’m lucky.**” Try to capture what is fascinating and admirable in either of these environments and arrange your photos into a collage to share with your classmates. If you don’t have access to a camera, try creating a similar collage about any topic that interests you, using images from magazines or the internet. (*Photography, Collage, Current Events*)

We couldn't do it without you...

Theater is often described as a collaborative art form. This means that the talents of many people are needed to put on a show: playwrights, directors, designers, technicians, actors – and the audience. No kidding...we couldn't do it without you.

Plays require audiences, whose careful attention and enthusiastic reactions give a whole new life to performances. Silence, laughter and even tears can tell us a lot about how the work is reaching out to you. Through your considerate observation of sets, costumes, lighting and the work of the actors, you'll be better able to follow the story and enjoy its live presentation.

Of course, theater is very different from movies and television, since you are sitting in the same room with the actors. These performers spend weeks in rehearsal practicing how to move precisely and learning how to time the lines and reactions carefully. When inappropriate movement or conversation in the audience distracts the actors, they are not able to give you the fine performance that they rehearsed for you. Your attention literally helps them to succeed.

So we hope you will understand how important **you** are to this collaboration and help the actors by watching and listening carefully. Those seated around you will either learn from your example or appreciate your thoughtful attention. Enjoy the show!

Special thanks to The Kennedy Center for the model provided by their "Cue Sheet for Students"



Visiting Milwaukee Chamber Theatre

Milwaukee Chamber Theatre is housed in the Broadway Theatre Center, on North Broadway, about four blocks south of the interstate overpass. This production will take place in our Studio Theatre which seats about 99 people. When you're facing the building you'll see a cement ramp and a single door to your left. Enter the building here.

Immediately to your right after you go through two glass doors is a central, public lobby area. Inside this common area are restrooms and water fountains. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are **NOT** permitted in the theater. ENJOY!

Special thanks to all the extraordinary educators and historians who helped with research and implementation of this production's education programs:



Kimberly Abler, Ryan Hurley and Teri Sullivan

Jewish Museum Milwaukee, Ellie Gettinger
Milwaukee Art Museum, Brooke Mulvaney
Milwaukee County Historical Society, Steve Daily and Michael Reuter
Milwaukee Public Museum, Dawn Koceja
Milwaukee Public Schools, Christina Flood
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives, Ellen Engseth

Don't miss our next production:



BUS STOP by William Inge

Directed by Lisa Kornetsky

Student Matinee: Thurs., April 19 at 11:00 a.m.

In the middle of a howling blizzard, four passengers become stranded overnight in a small-town diner. Written in 1955, it's still enormously hilarious today!! BUS STOP is a collaborative effort with UW-Parkside and will feature three student actors.

If you have questions or would like to reserve tickets, please call or e-mail Cara McMullin at 414-276-8842 x 114 or cara@chamber-theatre.com

Generous sponsors for the MCT production of A THOUSAND WORDS include:

Sheldon and Marianne Lubar Charitable Fund
Michael and Shirley Mosesson
The Dental Offices of Dr. David Paris
John and Carolyn Peterson Charitable Foundation, Inc.

Additional 2011/12 Education/Outreach Sponsors:

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