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Spotlight on Learning

a Pioneer Theatre Company
Classroom Companion

Pioneer Theatre Company’s Student Matinee Program is made possible through the support of Salt Lake County’s Zoo, Arts and Parks Program, Salt Lake City Arts Council/Arts Learning Program, The Simmons Family Foundation, The Meldrum Foundation Endowment Fund, George Q. Morris Foundation, and R. Harold Burton Foundation.



Approx. running time:
80 minutes, which is completed
in one act (no intermission).

Student Talk-Back:
There will be a Student Talk-Back directly after the performance.

By Jeremy Kareken & David Murrell
& Gordon Farrell

Based on the essay/Book by
John D’Agata & Jim Fingal

November 1 – 16, 2019

Jim Fingal is a fresh-out-of-Harvard fact checker for a prominent but sinking New York magazine. John D’Agata is a talented writer with a transcendent essay about the suicide of a teenage boy—an essay that could save the magazine from collapse. When Jim is assigned to fact check D’Agata’s essay, the two come head to head in a comedic, yet gripping, battle over facts versus truth.

Director’s Note

By Wes Grantom

Throughout this process, the cast and I have been playing a game called “Two Truths and a Lie.”

It’s an icebreaker exercise in which a person shares two facts about themselves that are true and one that is false. The other players have to decipher the truths from the lie. This activity has helped us get to know each other as we rehearse, but more than that, it has tested our ability to parse fact from fiction—a skill that seems increasingly important in our current landscape of deep-fake videos, disinformation campaigns, and alternative facts. With this constant barrage of contradictory information, one starts to wonder if we are creating a world where the truth is no longer knowable or even important.

In the age of the internet, we can obtain essentially any information we seek. Have a question? Google it. Want to know what a person looks like? Facebook them. Need to know how to build something? YouTube it. Information is literally at our fingertips, and yet it is harder than ever to know what is actually real.

Take this play for example. The central characters are an author named John D’Agata and a factchecker named Jim Fingal. John D’Agata is a real-life author who wrote a real-life essay that was fact-checked by a real-life fact-checker named Jim Fingal. This would lead one to believe this play is a true story. If you look closer, however, you’ll find the label “true story” is much

more complicated. This is a play adapted by three playwrights, from a book by two authors, based on an essay by one author, who freely admits he “nudged” the facts. In an interview in *Electric Lit*, John D’Agata says that while writing the book *The Lifespan of a Fact*, he and his coauthor “recreated” some aspects of the story and “completely fabricated” others. And that was before three playwrights got a hold of it. This play is the literary equivalent of a tiny Russian doll nesting within different versions of the “truth.” Is one version more true than another? Is one more factual? Perhaps these writers are simply taking the same creative liberties each of us allow ourselves to take on a daily basis. I offer your latest Instagram story as evidence.

As a society, we grant ourselves license to curate facts to shape the stories we present to the world. Our news stories, art, literature, movies, and social media all present a different version of the truth, supported by varying degrees of fact. Our culture seems to have an unspoken code for blurring the line between fact and fiction, but at what point do we lose the ability to decipher between the two? Some of the characters in this play might argue that this is an instance when asking the question is more important than knowing the answer.

Two truths and a lie.

Give it a shot. Turn to the person next to you and see if they can tell which is which.



Biography of Essayist John D'Agata

Born 1975, in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Mr. D'Agata is an American essayist. He is the author of six books of nonfiction, including *The Next American Essay* (2003), *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009), and *The Making of the American Essay*—all part of the trilogy of essay anthologies called *A New History of the Essay*. He also wrote *The Lifespan of a Fact*, *Halls of Fame*, and *About a Mountain*.

He's the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Howard Foundation and the Lannan Foundation. He is the M.F. Carpenter Professor of Writing in the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

What Happens There

*Note:

The Lifespan of a Fact is based on the fact-checking process for an essay written by John D'Agata in 2003. Here's section one of his essay, which is referenced in the play.

1.

One summer, when sixteen-year-old Levi Presley jumped from the observation deck of the 1,149-foot-high tower of the Stratosphere Hotel in Las Vegas, the local city council was considering a bill that would temporarily ban lap dancing in the city's strip clubs, archaeologists unearthed shards of the world's oldest bottle of Tabasco brand sauce from beneath a parking lot, and a woman from Mississippi beat a chicken named Ginger in a thirty-five-minute-long game of tic-tac-toe.

On the day that Levi Presley died, five others died from two types of cancer, four from heart attacks, three because of strokes.

It was a day of two suicides by gunshot as well.

The day [of] another suicide from falling, too.

At a record 113 degrees, it also happened to be one of that

summer's hottest days—a day that caused the World's Tallest Thermometer to break, raised the price of bottled water to five dollars for eight ounces, and caused a traffic jam on the north end of the Las Vegas Strip as a tourist family traveled toward downtown Las Vegas, rolled over a broken bottle from a homeless woman's cart, blew out a back tire, hit a parked car, and stalled outside the entrance of the Stratosphere Hotel when the jack inside the back of their rented Dodge Stratus sank into the heat-softened asphalt of the street.

We therefore know that when Levi Presley jumped from the tower of the Stratosphere Hotel at 6:01:43 p.m.—eventually hitting the ground at 6:01:52 p.m.—there were over a hundred tourists in five dozen cars that were honking and bumping and idling and yelling at the base of the Stratosphere tower.

Some of them looked up from the traffic jam that night and briefly saw in the sky something fall from the dark, and then through the palms, and then to the city's pavement. Some of them left their cars to look down at what had fallen. And six of them gave statements of what they saw to the police.

When I asked the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department whether I could read some of those statements that the witnesses had given, Police Sergeant Steve Barela explained, “You don't want to read any of that, man. That stuff is just facts.

None of this is gonna sound like a Mickey Spillane novel. You know?”

When I asked a woman at Las Vegas Teen Crisis whether suicide is a problem for teenagers in the city, she told me that she preferred I “not write any of that down.”

When I asked Michael Gilmartin, the public relations manager at the Stratosphere Hotel, whether his hotel has a system in place for discouraging people from jumping off his tall tower, Michael Gilmartin first asked if I was kidding, and then Gilmartin said, “Listen, I don’t want to be associated with some piece about a kid who killed himself here, OK?... I mean, really, what’s the upside to that? All I can see is a downside. If you can tell me how this story could benefit the hotel then maybe we could discuss it, but right now I don’t want to be a part of it.”

What I know for certain about Levi Presley is what he looked like, how old he was, what kind of car he drove, what school he attended, what girl he liked and what girl liked him, his favorite outfit, favorite movie, favorite restaurant, favorite band, what level belt he held in Tae Kwon Do, what design he had sketched onto the wall of his bedroom—very lightly, in pencil—and later planned to fill in, which drawings of his from art school he is thought to have been particularly proud of and whether their themes could be said to provide an indication of suicidal “ideation,” the nick-

name of his car, the two different nicknames his parents had each given him, his answers to the questions on the last pop quiz he took in school—

What is good? What is bad?
What does “art” mean to you?
Now look at the chair on the table in front of you and describe it in literal terms...

—and of which bottle of cologne among the five Levi kept in the medicine cabinet down the hall his small bedroom still smelled, even after his parents had ripped up its carpeting, thrown out its bed, and emptied its closet of everything but his art, by the time I first visited them, three months after his death.

What I know for certain about Levi Presley, in other words, is whatever Gail, his mom, and Levi Senior, his dad, were willing to say to a person they’d never met before about their sixteen-year-old son, which was, I quickly realized upon meeting them, anything.

“Whatever you want,” they said. “We’ll go on the record about anything.”

But, among those who did not know Levi Presley personally, among those in Las Vegas who only knew of this boy by body or rumor or newscast or name, what officially would be placed on the record about his death, and what officially would be taken off it, and what officially, from the very start, would never be allowed to get anywhere near that record of Levi Presley’s

death, would come to contrast so completely the eager openness of Levi’s parents that there appeared at times to exist two entirely different versions of Levi Presley’s suicide. There was the one that happened on a Saturday, July 13, at approximately 6:01 p.m., on the herring-boned brickwork of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino’s north entrance driveway, a hot night, the winds from the east blowing white palls of dust, the stock market low, unemployment rates high, the moon only showing half of itself, and Mars and Jupiter aligned, which isn’t particularly rare, and so there is no phenomenon to which one in desperation might try to attribute the disparity of facts that surround this particular death’s most blunt fact: that Levi Presley’s body had been found “supine” and “damaged” but “relatively intact” on the driveway of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, according to the Coroner of Clark County, Nevada; or that Levi Presley’s body had been found “splattered to a million pieces” on the driveway of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, according to an officer with the Las Vegas Police; or that parts of Levi Presley had been found a day later, sixty feet away and across the street, according to a witness at a nearby motel.

And then there was the death, according to some in Vegas, that simply did not seem to have occurred.

BOY, 16, JUMPS FROM STRATOSPHERE

Las Vegas Sun
Monday, July 15, 2002 | 10:57 a.m.

A 16-year-old Las Vegas boy jumped to his death after he scaled two fences on the 109th floor of the Stratosphere Tower Saturday night.

Levi Walton Presley jumped from the outdoor observation deck about 6 p.m. Saturday, landing on the driveway to the hotel by Las Vegas Boulevard, Metro Police said.

Presley's death was ruled a suicide by the Clark County coroner's office.

Stratosphere security guards were alerted by an alarm system that Presley had climbed over the first 5-foot fence, said Mike Gilmartin, a hotel spokesman.

"The officer got there in about 10 to 15 seconds (after the alarm), but he didn't give the officer a chance," Gilmartin said. "(Presley) he climbed over the (second 10-foot high) fence, waved and then jumped."

In January 2000 a 24-year-old Utah man also scaled the two security barriers and jumped off the 1,149-foot tower to his death.



OUR EQUITY CAST



Ben Cherry

WES GRANTOM (Director) has worked with companies such as Ars Nova, Pittsburgh CLO, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Asolo Rep, Berkshire Theatre Group, Theatreworks USA, Premiere Stages, the Atlantic, New Harmony Project, among others.

BEN CHERRY (John D'Agata) appeared on Broadway in *Indecent* and *Fiddler on the Roof* and Off-Broadway in *Goldstein*. Other regional highlights include *Mothers and Sons* at Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, and four seasons at the Utah Shakespeare Festival.



Constance Macy



John Kroft

JOHN KROFT (Jim Fingal) has appeared in Dan Cody's *Yacht* (MTC), *Arcadia* (Juilliard), and *Troilus and Cressida* (Columbia). Regionally, he has performed in such shows as *The Great Gatsby* (Bay Street Theater) and *Dracula* (Williamstown Theatre Festival).

CONSTANCE MACY (Emily Penrose) is based in Indianapolis where she is a frequent performer at the Indiana Repertory Theatre. Other regionals include Seattle Children's Theatre, Geva (Rochester, NY), Syracuse Stage, Playmakers Rep (Chapel Hill, NC), Kansas City Rep, and Cardinal Stage (Bloomington, IN).