

Pacific Theatre presents
a Bleeding Heart Theatre Production



DISCUSSION GUIDE

THE AMISH PROJECT

By Jessica Dickey

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A Bleeding Heart Theatre production, presented in association with Pacific Theatre

CREATIVE TEAM

Director • Evan Frayne
Set Designer • Carolyn Rapanos
Lighting Designer • Jonathan Kim
Costume Designer • Jacqueline Firkins
Sound Designer • James Coomber
Movement Coach • Wendy Gorling

CAST

Susie Coodin

Stage Manager • Susan Miyagishima
Production Manager • Phil Miguel
Technical Director • Kougar Basi

ON FACT AND FICTION IN THE AMISH PROJECT

The Amish Project is a fictional exploration of the Nickel Mines schoolhouse shooting in an Amish community, and the path of forgiveness and compassion forged in its wake.

The Amish Project made its original debut at the New York International Fringe Festival in the summer of 2008 and instantly generated buzz in the theatre community. *The Amish Project* went on to a workshop production at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City, and on June 10th, 2009, officially opened Off-Broadway at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater to rave reviews — "extraordinary... remarkable...compelling" (*The New York Times*). Due to its success, the run was extended.

Since then, *The Amish Project* has been invited to perform in venues around the tri-state area, and interest continues to grow. We are now looking to move into the great regional theatres of the country and would love for you to consider *The Amish Project* for your upcoming season.

THE WRITING OF THE AMISH PROJECT

Through the making of *The Amish Project*, I learned that the boundary between fact and fiction is a fraught one; it feels appropriate to open a window into my negotiation with that boundary.

The Facts: I absorbed a great deal about the Nickel Mines shooting just from watching the news when it occurred, and so in preparation for writing the play, I focused my attention on researching the Amish themselves. I am indebted to Donald Kraybill for the many books he has written on the Amish; they were the backbone of my research. Once the play was written and the characters firmly established, I included more details of the shooting that I felt would strengthen the texture of the play.

The Fiction: I was highly aware through the entire process that somewhere out there are the real people who went through this event—the widow of the Nickel Mines gunman and her children, the Amish families of the girls who were targeted in the shooting... In an effort to balance the conflicting desires to remain sensitive to the real people who were affected by the shooting, while giving myself creative license to write an unflinching play, I purposefully did not research the gunman or his widow, nor did I conduct any interviews of any kind. The characters in *The Amish Project* are fictional, and should not be misconstrued as the real people.

The Play: July 28th, 2008, my director and I traveled to Nickel Mines to find the location of the shooting. We had read that without an informed guide, it was nearly impossible to find, as shortly after the event, the Amish tore down the school and replanted the area; it is now a simple field where animals graze. The only indications of where the shooting occurred are three maple trees.

As we drove through the small intersection of farmland that is Nickel Mines, I realized that every person we saw, gardening or hanging clothes on the line, had likely grieved the loss of a child, or the children of friends... As the sun was setting and we stood quietly looking at the three maple trees and the vacant space where they used to shade the one room schoolhouse, I could feel the tragedy that had occurred here, but even more I could feel the presence of those we had passed en route, the people who carry the memory of that day with them... It is my private prayer that this play, should they ever know about it, would not hurt them further, but somehow honor the goodness they forged in the face of such tragedy. In my mind, that is the legacy of the Nickel Mines shooting.

-Jessica Dickey, www.amishproject.com



Susie Coodin in The Amish Project. Photo by Emily Cooper.
Photos available at www.pacifictheatre.org/about/photos

ABOUT AMISH FAITH, LIFESTYLE, AND HISTORY

The Amish religion grew out of the Protestant Reformation and Anabaptist movement, when groups of Christians separated from the established Catholic church to form their own denomination basing beliefs on Scripture, adult baptism and a separation of church and state. Anabaptist leader Menno Simons, founder of the Mennonite denomination, also taught pacifism and a focus on separation from this world.

The Amish separated from the Mennonites under the leadership of Jakob Ammann, who believed Mennonites were not following the doctrine of separation from the world. He also saw the punishment for non-conformity as too lenient and desired more frequent communion.

Disagreement over the inclusion of shunning eventually caused a permanent split – more conservative members of the Mennonite faith who agreed with Ammann’s ways left the Mennonite Church and a new church was born.

In later years, after extended turmoil in the church, reconciliation was sought with the Mennonites but agreement could not be made over the shunning issue. Jakob Ammann excommunicated himself as an act of humility.

SALVATION

While most Evangelical Christian traditions deem that a person is saved from the moment when they accept Jesus’ crucifixion as payment for their sin, the Amish see salvation as an ongoing process of living life in a proper manner.

Claiming salvation as a result of a conversion experience is seen as prideful to the Amish, instead believing that God will measure one’s life and obedience, giving reward to the faithful.

THE ORDNUNG

The Ordnung is a set of rules for Amish life, based in Scripture. It is voted on yearly by members of each individual congregation and differs from church to church, providing guidance on roles to men and women on how to live life. This includes details like acceptable clothes, colour and length of a woman’s dress, education of children, use (or not) of insurance, transportation, and so on.



TECHNOLOGY

The Ordnung also includes each community's rules for use of modern technology. Each congregation differs, and in fact, while the impression is that the Amish reject all technology, the reality is simply that they intentionally deliberate the use of new technologies as they emerge. Factors considered include whether the new technology will be truly beneficial or harmful, if it will enhance or detract from community, and if it will draw them into the pressures of modern society or not.

Often members, or at least leaders, try out the new technology to determine whether it is a fit for them.

RUMSPRINGA

The Amish firmly believe that you cannot be baptized into the faith without making an informed decision to join the church. Rumspringa, or "running around" occurs between the ages of 16 and 21, and involves young people leaving the Amish community to experience the world, however they choose.

This choice is vital, because should a person choose, after a rumspringa, to be baptized and stay with the Amish faith, they cannot leave without being shunned. Those who choose not to return and do not get baptized, however, are not shunned as they were never true members of the church. Instead, a person who does not return after their rumspringa is seen as a wayward child who may return at any time.



SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Amish communities provide a strong and secure social structure to their members. There is a strong sense of belonging and contentment, so that 80-90% of those who grow up in Amish culture stay with the church.

The church, which refers not just to the church building, but the people themselves, provides support for those who are sick or in need through practical labour, financial assistance, and personal or spiritual support. Barn raisings are common and anticipated community events. Church services are held every other Sunday, with alternate Sundays set aside for socializing and relaxation.

Sources:

www.exploring-amish-country.com

<http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2013/09/02/217287028/amish-community-not-anti-technology-just-more-thoughtful>

THE 2006 SHOOTING AND FORGIVENESS

On October 2, 2006, milkman Charles Carl Roberts IV entered an Amish one-room schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. He had the boys help carry supplies in from his truck, including plywood and bolts to barricade the door. He then sent the women and boys out of the school, keeping the ten girls aged 6-13 inside.

During this time, two women who were in the school were able to run to a nearby farm and call 911. Roberts also called 911 and his wife before shooting the girls, claiming he was there to seek revenge on a wrong done to him 20 years prior. In total there were three 911 callers: Amos Smoker (the nearby farmer), Charles Roberts, and his wife, Marie Roberts. He then lined the girls up against the chalkboard and tied them up. When police arrived he shot them as well as himself. Five girls were killed.

The Amish community responded by immediately forgiving the shooter and providing aid to his family as well as those of the murdered girls. They went to the widow's home hours after the tragedy to comfort her and her family. The schoolhouse was torn down, and a new one (the New Hope School) was built elsewhere.

FORGIVENESS

There were mixed responses to the immediate extension of forgiveness. Some called it disrespectful to the dead and claimed that this no-strings-attached forgiveness of such an atrocious act denied the presence of evil. Others found the forgiveness inspiring.

The widow of Charles Carl Roberts expresses gratitude for the expression of forgiveness, saying that it provided the healing her family needed.

"We must no think evil of this man."
– Rev. Robert Schneck, on CNN

"I don't think there's anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way, but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts."
–Jack Meyer, on CNN

Sources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Nickel_Mines_School_shooting

<http://web.archive.org/web/20071210073251/http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/10/04/amish.shooting/index.html>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1.** A major theme of the piece is forgiveness. What does the word forgiveness mean to you? Do you think forgiving and forgetting are the same thing?
- 2.** The Amish Project describes forgiveness as a gift that is "heavy to receive and heavy to give." Do you agree? Is it harder to give or to receive forgiveness?
- 3.** How does the Amish process of forgiveness differ from the Western process of dealing with a tragedy?
- 4.** What impact did one person playing all the roles have on you as you were watching the play? What might it have been like if this was an ensemble piece?
- 5.** In the play, a scene is described where the father of the two Amish girls who were killed in the shooting is sitting up at the kitchen table late at night begging God for help with his grief. What do you think this scene tells us?
- 6.** Another part of Amish culture embedded in the play is the concept of "uffgewwe" – pronounced "oof-give-ah" – a word which means "to give up." The Amish 'give up' their individual needs for the betterment of the community. What are your thoughts on this?