By Heidi Schreck
Directed by JoAnn Johnson

May 3 – May 29, 2016

Time & Place: A soup kitchen on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx.

THIS PLAY HAS NO INTERMISSION AND RUNS APPROXIMATELY 2 HOURS.

STUDY GUIDE

Study guide prepared by Jessica Gleason, Marketing & Publications Manager with additional content provided by Nate Cohen & Luan Schooler
Cast

Ayanna Berkshire^........................................Shelley
Allen Nause^..................................................Frog
John San Nicolas^............................................Oscar
Jahnavi Alyssa................................................Emma

^Artists Rep Resident Artist

Creative Team

Scenic Designer............................................................................................................................................Kristeen Willis Crosser^
Lighting Designer............................................................................................................................................Carl Faber
Costume Designer..............................................................................................................................................Emily Horton
Sound Designer...............................................................................................................................................Sharath Patel^
Dialect Coach................................................................................................................................................Mary McDonald Lewis^
Fight Choreographer.......................................................................................................................................Jonathan Cole
Props Master.....................................................................................................................................................Amy Katrina Bryan
Production Stage Manager.............................................................................................................................Carol Ann Wohlmut
Assistant Stage Manager....................................................................................................................................Karen Hill
Assistant Director...............................................................................................................................................Nate Cohen
Production Assistant.........................................................................................................................................Jessica Evans Irvine
Board Operator..................................................................................................................................................Dave Petersen

^Artists Rep Resident Artist
Portland’s premiere mid-size regional theatre company is led by Artistic Director Dámaso Rodriguez and Managing Director Sarah Horton. Founded in 1982, Artists Repertory Theatre is the longest-running professional theatre company in Portland. Artists Rep’s mission is to engage diverse audiences in fresh, thought-provoking and intimate theatre. We are committed to world-class acting, directing, design and stagecraft that support new playwriting and aspire to embody great literature, moving audiences to truly feel — to experience — storytelling in a way that only the best live theatre can.
In an industrial soup kitchen in the Bronx, Shelley is a nun struggling to pray and questioning her life’s work. Her world in service to the needy, alongside a Dominican immigrant security guard and joke-writing “regular,” is rocked when a rainbow-haired college drop-out comes to volunteer. The girl’s enthusiasm and erratic behavior will change the course of their lives. With touching humor this motley group unravels the intricacies of need, the vagaries of compassion and limits of forgiveness.

“Grand Concourse may well break your heart. You may need tissues by the end.” — New York Post

“Insightful with a moving, even shocking epiphany.” — Huffington Post

“Heidi Schreck’s beautiful tragicomedy of life... reminds you of why you go to the theater in the first place.”
—Chicago Sun Times

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Heidi Schreck is a writer and actor living in Brooklyn who grew up in Wenatchee, Washington and attended the University of Oregon as a theatre major. Her plays include Grand Concourse, which premiered at Playwrights Horizons and Steppenwolf Theatre in 2014/15 and was a Lilly Award winner and finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn prize; Creature (New Georges and Page 73); There Are No More Big Secrets (Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre); and The Consultant (Long Wharf Theatre). Other playwriting awards include the Claire Tow Fellowship at Playwrights Horizons, the Roe Green Award at Cleveland Playhouse, and the Page 73 Playwriting Fellowship. Heidi is an alumna of the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab and Sundance Theatre Lab, and is currently commissioned by MTC, True Love Productions, South Coast Rep and the Atlantic Theatre Company. As an actor, Heidi has performed at Playwrights Horizons, The Public Theatre (Shakespeare in the Park); MTC, Theater of a Two-Headed Calf, The Foundry, Clubbed Thumb, The Women's Project, The Roundabout, Williamstown, Berkeley Rep, Center Theatre Group, and with The Talking Band. She has also worked as a writer and actor on Showtime's NURSE JACKIE and BILLIONS, and as reporter in St. Petersburg Russia. Heidi has received two OBIES, a Drama Desk, and the Theatre World Award.
ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Among JoAnn’s directing credits for Artists Rep are *Ballerina*, *Birdsend*, *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*, *Vanya*, *Blackbird* and *The Gin Game*. Other directing credits include *boom* and *The School for Lies* (Theatre Vertigo); *Macbeth* (Quintessence); *Richard II* and *King Lear* (Northwest Classical); *Precious Little* (defunkt); *Watbanaland* (Portland Actors Conservatory); *Big Love* (University of Portland); *The Detective’s Wife* (Hellfire Productions) and *The Turn of the Screw* (Portland Shakespeare Project). Among her many roles for Artists Rep are Katharine in *Mothers and Sons*, Hattie in *Ten Chimneys*, Vivian Bearing in *Wit*, Flora in *Humble Boy*, Leo in *Indiscretions*, Mrs. Rafi in *The Sea*, and Alice in *Retreat From Moscow*. Other roles include Sister Aloysius in *Doubt* and Kate Keller in *All My Sons* (Arkansas Repertory Theatre); Big Mama in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Portland Center Stage); Leni Riefenstahl in *Leni* (Insight Out Theatre Collective); Sarah Bernhardt in *Memoir* (Coho Productions); Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit* and Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Tacoma Actors Guild); and Meg in *The Birthday Party* and Aunt Sally in *Fifth of July* (Profile Theatre). Other theatres include The Old Globe, The Empty Space, Pioneer Theatre, Utah Shakespearean Festival, Sacramento Theatre Company, San Jose Repertory Theatre, Liminal, Imago and many seasons with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. For Artists Rep, JoAnn has toured to Asia, Africa and the Middle East in the role of A in *Three Tall Women*. She is a Resident Artist at Artists Rep and a member of Actors’ Equity.
The Grand Boulevard and Concourse, completed in 1909, running north and south through the Bronx, was envisioned as an ideal neighborhood. It represented upward mobility for hundreds of thousands of first and second-generation immigrants to America. But by the 1960s, as in many other American cities, the decline had begun – the once grand neighborhood was decimated by poverty, racism and violence. The South Bronx, where our story takes place, had become a symbol of urban violence and despair. It remains the poorest urban county in America.

The soup kitchen of Heidi Schreck’s Grand Concourse reflects this recent past and painful present. The people who gather here need food, shelter and safety from the dangers of the street. But the human needs go beyond the physical – to a desire for community and for spiritual sustenance. And those who serve them a hot meal “to get them through the day” are not immune to the desperation of those they serve – they have demons of their own.

So in this simple setting, big questions are lurking. What are the limits of compassion? Who is deserving of forgiveness? What is our personal response to the desperation on our own streets? And is there hope for us?

-JoAnn Johnson

Clockwise from left: The Grand Boulevard and Concourse in 1900, just before it was completed; The same area today, with Yankee Stadium in the background. At East 165th Street in the South Bronx.
The Grand Concourse (originally known as the Grand Boulevard and Concourse) is a major thoroughfare in the borough of the Bronx in New York City. It was designed by Louis Aloys Risse, an Alsatian immigrant who had previously worked for the New York Central Railroad and was later appointed chief topographical engineer for the New York City government.

Risse first conceived of the road in 1890, as a means of connecting the borough of Manhattan to the northern Bronx. Construction began on the Grand Concourse in 1894 and it was opened to traffic in November 1909. Built during the height of the City Beautiful movement, it was modeled on the Champs-Élysées in Paris but is considerably larger.

The area saw a housing boom amongst upwardly mobile, predominantly Jewish and Italian, families who were fleeing the crowded tenements of Manhattan. In 1923, Yankee Stadium opened near the Grand Concourse at 161st Street. By the mid-1930s, almost three hundred apartment buildings had been built along the Concourse. Customarily five or six stories high with wide entrance courtyards bordered with grass and shrubs, among these apartments are many of the finest examples of Art Deco and Art Moderne architecture in the United States.

The south and central Bronx began to rapidly deteriorate in the 1960s. White flight drained many residents of the South Bronx, pulled by the dream of suburban life and pushed by fear of mounting crime. At the same time, over 170,000 people displaced by slum clearance in Manhattan, mostly African American and Puerto Rican, moved to Concourse. The city also adopted policies of relocating welfare recipients to the area, paying fees to landlords. Migration to the suburbs, retirement to Florida, and the construction of Co-op City in the fringes of the northeastern Bronx between 1968 and 1970 drained the areas along the Grand Concourse of most of its remaining middle-class residents. Many if not most buildings in the area were damaged by arson, vandalism, and a lack of maintenance. Starting in the 1990s, when the Bronx's population began to grow for the first time in 20 years, a wave of affordable housing construction came to the area.

At the turn of the 21st century, the Grand Concourse underwent an $18 million restoration and landscaping, to widen the medians and improve lighting from 161st to 167th Streets, which was completed in 2008. Funding is being allocated for a reconstruction of the Grand Concourse from 167th Street to 171st Street.

In 2011, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission declared a historic district on the Grand Concourse from 153rd to 167th Street.
Interview with the playwright Heidi Schreck...

Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago presented a production of *Grand Concourse* during its 2014/15 season. Playwright Heidi Schreck, Director Yasen Peyankov and Dramaturg Dassia N. Posner discuss *Grand Concourse* in the interview below.

**DASSIA N. POSNER:** Grand Concourse, the largest street in the Bronx, was originally designed to be even grander than Paris’s Champs-Élysées—yet it runs through what is now our country’s poorest urban county. Why this setting for the play?

**HEIDI SCHRECK:** I didn’t have a lot of grand designs when I named it. I worked at a soup kitchen in the Bronx called POTS (Part Of The Solution), which was started by a group of Catholic nuns and priests but has evolved into a secular community service organization. It’s right near Grand Concourse. I put that on as a temporary name and then I liked it. One definition of “Concourse” is a coming together of people. And then of course it’s a huge avenue, something you can move from one place to another on. But its original meaning is a sort of grand meeting.

**YASEN PEYANKOV:** I love how deceiving the title is. It has something very large in scope about it. When I first read the play, I didn’t know it was connected to this huge boulevard. It just felt like an intimate play with grand emotions inside.

**DP:** And within this grandness there’s a soup kitchen. Can you tell us about this setting?

**HS:** I grew up working in soup kitchens with my parents. It was a big part of my childhood, and I thought it would be an interesting place to set a play. I also worked for social justice organizations when I first moved to New York, and I found it fascinating that the people who came to volunteer, including me, were looking for nourishment as much as the people who were coming to receive the services. And they can be kind of crazy, screwed up environments. People have very complicated motives for doing good. And I wanted to explore that.

**YP:** I grew up in a Socialist country, where I never encountered the kind of need I found when I came to the U.S., the richest country in the world. Then for a few years, I had a theater company in residence at 615 West Wellington, United Church of Christ. There was a homeless shelter downstairs where the kitchen was, so it functioned as a soup kitchen as well. There’s something about the soup kitchen being in the “belly” of the church, you know? This manifests in our design: the outline of a church with stunning mural windows and then, in the belly, the lower depths.

**HS:** I love that!

**DP:** The play’s soup kitchen is run by Shelley, a nun who was inspired in part by Catholic activist Dorothy Day, who famously said, “The Gospel has taken away our right forever to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor.” For Day, giving is something we just ought to do. Should we choose who deserves help? Or should giving be truly generous?

**HS:** I find it a very profound statement to say that it’s not our job to decide who is deserving and who is not. Part of Shelley’s struggle is just learning whether what she’s offering, for example, to Emma is actually help or not. That’s a question that’s alive in the play for Shelley, that maybe there are other ways of doing good in the world than the one she’s committed her life to.

**YP:** I was stunned by that quote. Nobody makes a choice to be poor. But if we’re talking about need, some people have desperate needs and you try to help, but sometimes it makes things worse. So how do you make that call?
DP: And how do you balance looking after yourself with the kind of altruism that is at the heart of this play?

HS: There is certainly value in questioning the most effective way to do good for others and for ourselves. There is true generosity, and there is altruism that comes out of avoiding a reckoning with ourselves. In Day's book it's clear that she also struggled with this and was constantly questioning her own motives for devoting her life to others less fortunate than she was.

DP: Day also wrote, “We must talk about poverty because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it.” This reminds me of something Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, recently wrote: the 53 wealthiest New Yorkers have as much money as 17 million minimum wage workers. Does this kind of wealth blind people to the needs of others?

HS: The wealth gap is the largest it’s been since the Great Depression. Absolutely that insulation happens. There have been lots of studies about how the more you have, the more protected you are, the greater effort you have to make to experience empathy for other people. It’s in our nature to believe that we have the things we have because we earned them, overlooking a lot of what has been given to us.

YP: This brings us back to the social context of the play, about the haves and have-nots. The line that sticks in my head, after Emma has served her first meal, “So much need,” puts into context the times we are living in.

DP: The play deals in an unusual, but provocative and exciting way, with the question of what it means to forgive.

HS: That’s the biggest question of the play for me. I’m an agnostic now, but I grew up in a Presbyterian household with loving, generous parents who taught me forgiveness as a default setting. It was only when I got older that I realized I didn't know, when I was forgiving people or attempting to forgive myself, if I was actually doing it. I understood that I was supposed to, but I realized I didn't understand exactly what it meant.

YP: That’s what really fascinated me about the play. It’s about the boundaries of forgiveness, and how flexible and stretchable those boundaries are.

HS: I think there’s something to acknowledging that it's a much harder, thornier process than it might seem. Forgiveness is a process. And it’s actually a very rigorous, difficult, painful one.

DP: How do the questions this play raises connect with larger things you're asking as an artist?

HS: I’m interested, here and in my other plays, in the gulf between the desire to live a “good life” and the practicality of what that actually means, in that space between intention and action. I’m interested in how hard it is to even figure out how to live an ethical life and then how complicated it is to enact.

DP: Yasen, how does this play resonate with your interests?

YP: There's always one defining factor when I decide to do a play. It's the humanity of the piece. And this one's oozing with humanity. And it’s the first play I've read that has almost no punctuation. It has such a freedom about it; you start to create your own music. And it has conflict and secrets and betrayals and a really unexpected turn at the end. So what's not to like?
While circumstances can vary, the main reason people experience homelessness is because they cannot find housing they can afford. It is the scarcity of affordable housing in the United States, particularly in more urban areas where homelessness is more prevalent, that is behind their inability to acquire or maintain housing.

By the numbers:

- In January 2015, **564,708 people** were homeless on a given night in the United States.
- Of that number, **206,286 were people in families**, and
- **358,422 were individuals**.
- About **15 percent** of the homeless population - 83,170 - are considered “chronically homeless” individuals.
- About **2 percent** - 13,105 - are considered “chronically homeless” people in families.
- About **8 percent** of homeless people - **47,725** - are veterans.

These numbers come from Point-in-Time Counts, which are conducted, community by community, on a single night in January every other year. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires communities to submit this data every other year in order to qualify for federal homeless assistance funds. Many communities conduct counts more regularly.

A vow is a sacred promise or commitment made publicly with the approval of the Church. Through her vows, a Sister responds with her whole life to God’s invitation to love Him completely and without reserve. This free response is a fuller expression of her baptismal call and is, for one who is genuinely called to the consecrated life, a means to greater holiness. All Christians are called to live the virtues of chastity, poverty and obedience; these vows provide for a purification of heart and spiritual freedom that uniquely mark the life of the consecrated woman religious. Living these vows enables her to focus her entire being on God and His people.

While all women religious profess the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, some communities take an additional vow. Some monastic communities profess a fourth vow of stability by which the monastery they enter remains their home for life unless they are called to be part of a new foundation. Other communities take a fourth vow of hospitality or service to the poor.

The vows of consecrated life are means by which a woman religious seeks to be more closely configured to the One she loves. Living these vows draws her into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. She embraces a transforming love who gives meaning to all suffering and sacrifice.
CHASTITY (Consecrated Celibacy)

A woman religious cannot help but respond with a total life gift to the God who has first loved her. When a woman religious falls in love with Jesus Christ and commits her life to Him completely, this determines the other facets of her life. Her choice to make Jesus the primary relationship in her life calls her to live a celibate lifestyle. The vow of celibacy means so much more than “not getting married.”

Celibacy is not about self-absorption and selfishness. One who lives a life committed to Jesus Christ will come to know, love, and serve Him in the people she encounters each day. Rather than turning her in on herself, celibacy expands the heart of the woman religious and frees her to love everyone with a generous love.

The call to live a chaste and celibate lifestyle is a strong affirmation of one’s sexuality. A woman religious does not deny or repress her sexuality. She lives her womanhood deeply and fruitfully by nurturing life wherever she goes, by developing rich and intimate relationships, and by being drawn out of herself in service, friendship and family.

POVERTY

The vow of poverty professed by a woman religious is a radical call to freedom. Unrestricted by the accumulation of wealth and material possessions, she is free to focus on relationships and service.

The vow of poverty does not mean a woman religious is called to live in destitution. God desires that she live simply, living from her needs rather than her wants. Keeping her life simple helps eliminate distractions that could draw the woman religious away from God. A woman head over heels in love with God does not fix her attention on material things.

Called to serve those most in need, the woman religious recognizes the face of Jesus in those who are poor and less fortunate. She responds to the call of Jesus in the Gospel, “Whatever you did to the least of my people, you did to me” (Mt 25). Her service goes beyond a condescending charity and stretches her to live in solidarity with those she encounters.

OBEDIENCE

In her vow of obedience, a woman religious strives to live her life in a stance of listening and responding to God’s will. This listening is a daily call to take on the mind and heart of Jesus as St. Paul writes: “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2: 5).

This configuring oneself to Jesus Christ affects all aspects of one’s being. A woman religious comes to know that everything she is and does flows from her striving to pattern her life after the One who calls her. No aspect of her life, no matter how seemingly insignificant, can be excluded from her obedient response.

The role of prayer in a life of obedience is central. It is in nurturing an ever deeper relationship with Jesus that the woman religious comes to take on His mind and heart. Daily, she comes before God asking in the spirit of John the Baptist that she “might decrease and He might increase.”

The role of the community is integral to the obedience professed by a woman religious. Far from being a “blind obedience” in which one simply does what she is told, the obedience of a disciple stretches her to take an active role in sifting through the various influences and calls in her life. Together with the community, she looks reverently at her gifts and talents as well as the needs of the world and strives to know how God is calling her to respond. Truly, the grace of community in this process is to have an extra set of ears with which to hear God’s call and invitation in the broader context.
Approximately 200,000 individuals with schizophrenia or manic-depressive illness are homeless, constituting one-third of the approximately 600,000 homeless population (total homeless population statistic based on data from Department of Health and Human Services). These 200,000 individuals comprise more than the entire population of many U.S. cities, such as Hartford, Connecticut; Charleston, South Carolina; Reno, Nevada; Boise, Idaho; Scottsdale, Arizona; Orlando, Florida; Winston Salem, North Carolina; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Abilene, Texas or Topeka, Kansas.

At any given time, there are more people with untreated severe psychiatric illnesses living on America’s streets than are receiving care in hospitals. Approximately 90,000 individuals with schizophrenia or manic-depressive illness are in hospitals receiving treatment for their disease. Source: Treatment Advocacy Center

The Prevalence Rate for schizophrenia is approximately 1.1% of the population over the age of 18 (source: NIMH) or, in other words, at any one time as many as 51 million people worldwide suffer from schizophrenia. Another way to express the prevalence of schizophrenia at any given time is the number of individuals affected per 1,000 total population. In the United States that figure is 7.2 per 1,000. This means that a city of 3 million people will have over 21,000 individuals suffering from schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia is a disease that typically begins in early adulthood; between the ages of 15 and 25. Men tend to get develop schizophrenia slightly earlier than women; whereas most males become ill between 16 and 25 years old, most females develop symptoms several years later, and the incidence in women is noticeably higher in women after age 30. The average age of onset is 18 in men and 25 in women. Schizophrenia onset is quite rare for people under 10 years of age, or over 40 years of age. The diagram below demonstrates the general "age of onset" trends for schizophrenia in men and women, from a representative study on the topic.

Of people with Schizophrenia approximately:

- 6% are homeless or live in shelters
- 6% live in jails or prisons
- 5% to 6% live in Hospitals
- 10% live in Nursing homes
- 25% live with a family member
- 28% are living independently
- 20% live in Supervised Housing (group homes, etc.)

Suicide Risk

People with the condition have a 50 times higher risk of attempting suicide than the general population; the risk of suicide is very serious in people with schizophrenia. Suicide is the number one cause of premature death among people with schizophrenia, with an estimated 10 percent to 13 percent killing themselves and approximately 40% attempting suicide at least once (and as much as 60% of males attempting suicide). The extreme depression and psychoses that can result due to lack of treatment are the usual causes. These suicides rates can be compared to the general population, which is somewhere around 0.01%. 

About Schizophrenia ...
Discussion Questions ...

- The play’s soup kitchen is run by Shelley, a nun who was inspired in part by Catholic activist Dorothy Day, who famously said, “The Gospel has taken away our right forever to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor.” For Day, giving is something we just ought to do. Should we choose who deserves help? Or should giving be truly generous?
- Have you ever worked in service of the needy? Has that shaped your world view at all?
- In Grand Concourse, we see Shelley frequently struggling with the ritual of prayer. Are there rituals you practice in your own routine, and how do those rituals influence or inform your everyday life?
- There are nearly 600,000 homeless people currently living in the United States, and more than a 1/3 of them struggle with some form of mental illness. Were you faced with a struggle to provide shelter for yourself or your family, how would you prioritize the need for security with issues like health, nutrition, comfort?
- Does religion create a set of expectations or values that differ from those generally held to be common human beliefs? Are there positive or negative implications of that?

Additional Resources ...

3. The most recent data from HUD can be found in the agency’s 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress. http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/snapshot_of_homelessness