November 19—December 17
Time : Now
Setting: A turn-of-the-century ground floor/basement duplex tenement apartment in New York City's Chinatown
[90 minute runtime with no intermission]
The Humans Study Guide

Spoilers ahead!
Cast

Erik Blake ................................................................. Robert Pescovitz*  
Deirdre Blake ....................................................... Luisa Sermol*  
Aimee Blake .......................................................... Val Landrum*  
Brigid Blake ............................................................ Quinlan Fitzgerald+  
Fiona “Momo” Blake ................................................ Vana O’Brien*  
Richard Saad .......................................................... John San Nicolas*  

Creative Team

Director ................................................................. Dámaso Rodríguez*  
Scenic Designer ....................................................... Megan Wilkerson#  
Costume Designer ...................................................... Gregory Pulver^  
Lighting Designer ....................................................... Kristeen Crosser#  
Composer/Sound Designer ........................................ Phil Johnson  
Voice & Text Director ............................................... Mary McDonald-Lewis^  
Props Master ............................................................. Katrina Lind  
Dramaturg ............................................................... Luan Schooler  
Wig Designer ............................................................. Diane Trapp  
Stage Manager ........................................................ Carol Ann Wohlmut*  
Assistant Director .................................................... Roy Arauz  
Production Assistant ................................................ Karen Hill+  
Board Op ................................................................. Alan Cline  
Artistic Producer ...................................................... Shawn Lee  
Associate Producer & Production Manager ..................... Kristeen Crosser  
Wardrobe ................................................................. Clare Hungate-Hawk  
Technical Director .................................................... Nathan Crone  
Master Carpenter ...................................................... Eddie Rivera  
Master Electrician ..................................................... Ronan Kilkelly  
Scenic Charge .......................................................... Sarah Kindler  
Scenic Design Intern .................................................. Colin Moore
Artists Repertory Theatre’s mission is to produce intimate, provocative theatre and provide a home for artists and audiences of varied backgrounds to take creative risks. Artists Rep is Portland’s premiere mid-size regional theatre company and is led by Artistic Director Dámaso Rodríguez and Managing Director Sarah Horton. Founded in 1982, Artists Repertory Theatre is the longest-running professional theatre company in Portland. Artist Rep became the 72nd member of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) in May 2016 and is an Associate Member of the National New Play Network (NNPN).
It’s the small dinner party that made big waves on Broadway about a fractured family at its not-so-finest. A bold, bruised, and billowing drama, *The Humans* layers the fabric of a family’s past as they gather at the youngest daughter and her boyfriend’s New York Chinatown apartment for a holiday meal. As the Blake family poke at old wounds and forcibly stumble through treasured traditions, tensions bubble over, secrets fight their way to the surface, and the world creaks curiously around them.

**SHOW DESCRIPTION**

“Stephen Karam’s kind, warm, beautifully observed and deeply moving new play [is] a celebration of working-class familial imperfection and affection and a game-changing work for this gifted young playwright.” - *Chicago Tribune*

"[A] blisteringly funny, bruisingly sad and altogether wonderful play." - *The New York Times*

"[A] beautiful, funny-sad and ultimately wrenching portrait of a troubled lower-middle-class Pennsylvania family." - *The Hollywood Reporter*

[The play succeeds in] finding gorgeous balance between humor and sadness, love and disappointment, hope and dread, solace and hollow desolation." - *The Hollywood Reporter*
STEPHEN KARAM is the author of *Sons Of The Prophet*, which recently ended its extended Off-Broadway run at the Laura Pels Theater in New York City (Roundabout Theatre Company) following its debut at the Huntington Theatre Company. Other plays include *Speech & Debate* (the inaugural production of Roundabout Underground); *Columbinus* (New York Theatre Workshop); *Girl On Girl* (Brown/Trinity Playwrights Rep); and *Emma* (a modern, musical version of Jane Austen's novel), performed by students at the Professional Performing Arts High School in NYC in association with Waterwell (published by Playscripts, Inc.). His other plays are published by Dramatists Play Service, American Theatre Magazine, Northwestern University Press and Dramatic Publishing Co.; his freelance writing has appeared in NY Magazine, The Advocate and McSweeney's.net. He is the author of the libretto for *DARK SISTERS*, an original chamber opera with composer Nico Muhly (co-produced by Gotham Chamber Opera, MTG and Opera Company of Philadelphia). A MacDowell Colony Fellow, Stephen grew up in Scranton, PA and is a graduate of Brown University.
Dámaso is in his fifth year as Artistic Director of Artists Repertory Theatre. In 2001 he co-founded the Los Angeles-based Furious Theatre Company, where he served as Co-Artistic Director until 2012. From 2007-2010 he served as Associate Artistic Director of the Pasadena Playhouse. His directing credits include work at Artists Rep, Playwrights’ Center, the Pasadena Playhouse, Intiman Theatre, South Coast Repertory, Laguna Playhouse, A Noise Within, The Theatre@Boston Court, Aked Angels and Furious Theatre. Rodriguez is a recipient of the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award, the Back Stage Garland Award, the NAACP Theatre Award and the Pasadena Arts Council’s Gold Crown Award. His productions have been nominated for multiple LA Weekly Theatre Awards and LA Stage Alliance Ovation Awards. In 2012, Rodriguez was honored by the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation as a Finalist for the Zelda Fichandler Award. He is a member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC).

Directing credits at Artists Rep include the World Premiere musical *Cuba Libre* by Carlos Lacámara featuring the music of three-time Grammy-nominated band Tiempo Libre; the Portland premieres of Nick Jones’ *Trevor*, David Ives’ adaptation of Pierre Corneille’s *The Liar*, Nina Raine’s *Tribes* and *Exiles* by Carlos Lacámara; the U.S. premiere of Dawn King’s *Foxfinder*, the West Coast premieres of Jeffrey Hatcher’s *Ten Chimneys* and Dan LeFranc’s *The Big Meal*; and revivals of *The Skin of Our Teeth* by Thornton Wilder, *The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson and *The Playboy of the Western World* by J.M. Synge. Credits at other theatres include productions by contemporary and classic playwrights including Craig Wright, Neil LaBute, Matt Pelfrey, Peter Sinn Nachtrieb, Richard Bean, Owen McCafferty, Alex Jones, William Shakespeare, Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Noel Coward, Bernard Shaw, Clifford Odets and Lillian Hellman. Upcoming directing projects for Rodriguez are: *Magellanica* by E.M. Lewis at Artists Rep and *Romeo & Juliet* by William Shakespeare at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

www.damaso-rodriguez.com
A Message from Artistic Director Dámaso Rodríguez

“If anything, I wish I could’ve known that most of the stuff I did spend my life worrying about wasn’t so bad.”

Welcome to Artists Rep and to the Portland premiere of Stephen Karam’s The Humans. If you’ve followed the New York theatre scene over the past year, you’ve likely heard of Karam’s Tony Winner and Pulitzer Finalist. Aside from its accolades, the play made news for earning an increasingly rare achievement: a long, must-see Broadway run without the benefit of a celebrity cast. Additionally, the play’s dramatic premise is simple: a middle class family of six gathers in a modest Manhattan apartment for Thanksgiving dinner, which (per the playwright’s instructions) “takes place in one real-time scene—on a two-level set—with no blackouts. Life continues in all spaces at all times.”

A Broadway hit free of spectacle? In The Humans the only spectacle is the hyper-realistic imitation of life and the playwright’s power to expose the ubiquitous anxieties of the U.S. middle class under the watchful gaze of audience members that likely see themselves within the three generations of the Blake family. This recognition of self in others takes the form of laughter for much of The Humans (a laughter of recognition vs. condescension). Despite my superficially different upbringing—Thanksgivings for me mean huge family gatherings set in Miami, Florida with a mix of Spanish and English dialogue—I see myself, my siblings, cousins, parents and grandparents very specifically represented on stage.

As I watched The Humans, which I had the opportunity to experience in its Broadway run, I marveled at how Karam had made a living document of our early 21st century American experience in the same way that Clifford Odets did of the 1930s and Arthur Miller the 1940s and 1950s. I’d never seen a play that seemed to hold Shakespeare’s proverbial “mirror up to Nature” in real time, our times, and I immediately wanted to share the experience with our audiences here in Portland. I was especially eager to produce the play in Artists Rep’s intimate venue, where an audience might feel like they were inside the apartment with the Blakes, and with actors from our community playing the roles. The fact that we’re opening our production on Thanksgiving weekend was a bit of lucky timing.

On behalf of all of us at Artists Rep, I want to wish you and your family a happy holiday season. As you gather around dinner tables with loved ones, I hope you’ll find comfort in the act of coming together. I look forward to welcoming you back to the theatre in the New Year!

Warmly,

Dámaso

P.S. Receiving the rights to premiere a new production so closely on the heels of a New York run is uncommon. In fact, the Broadway production (with its original cast) is touring other cities while our local team takes on the Portland premiere. We owe our good luck to the special approval of Stephen Karam, whose early play Speech and Debate was produced by Artists Rep back in 2008 before he was the toast of New York.
BLUE COLLAR LIFE
by Leah Reddy

In *The Humans*, Deirdre and Erik Blake, longtime residents of Scott Township, Pennsylvania, visit their daughter Brigid in New York City for Thanksgiving. As dinner is prepared, the family – including their older daughter Aimee, Brigid’s boyfriend Richard, and Erik’s senile mother Momo – discuss their respective life choices.

Deirdre and Erik struggle to understand why both of their daughters have chosen to leave northeastern Pennsylvania. As Erik says, “…yeah, well what I think’s funny is how you guys, you move to big cities and trash Scranton, when Momo [Erik’s mother] almost killed herself gettin outta New York – she didn’t have a real toilet in this city, and now her granddaughter moves right back to the place she struggled to escape…” The Blake family experience isn’t unique. High crime and decaying infrastructure made big cities unappealing to baby boomers in the 1970s and 1980s. But cities like New York have undergone major revitalization, which has led to millennials moving to cities at a higher rate and living there for longer periods of time.

The Blakes’ hometown, Scott Township, is a rural suburb of Scranton, a city of 75,000 in northeastern Pennsylvania. The Scranton region is the location of rich deposits of anthracite coal, a particularly valuable type of coal. Pennsylvania’s anthracite coal powered much of the Industrial Revolution in the United States, and immigrants from all over Europe, including Irish Catholics like the Blakes, found work in the mines. The work was dangerous and dirty, and immigrant laborers were exploited by mine owners. In an attempt to prevent workers from organizing, mine owners encouraged ethnic tensions, and immigrants retained a strong sense of national identity. Coal production dropped steadily during the latter half of the 20th Century.

While coal is no longer the area’s leading industry, the sense of ethnic solidarity and class antagonism it created remains. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Scranton still notes the origins of some of its congregations: Italian, Slovak, German, Polish, Tyrolese, Lithuanian, and Magyar parishes all exist or existed in the region. In Momo, Erik, and Deirdre’s generations, parish membership was used to put a person in context. It revealed what neighborhood you were from, your family’s economic or employment situation, and your ethnic background.

The Catholic faith is clearly important to the elder Blakes, who sent their children to Catholic schools, volunteer with their parish, and give their daughter a statue of the Virgin Mary.

While the Catholic Church’s official stance is that homosexual acts are immoral (though being homosexual is not a sin), the Blakes’ acceptance of Aimee’s sexual orientation is not unusual. Fifty-seven percent of American Catholics approve of legalizing same-sex marriage. Among Catholics aged 18-29, 85% say that homosexuality should be accepted rather than discouraged and 75% favor same-sex marriage. Brigid’s decision to move in with Richard, her boyfriend, also goes against church teachings on sex before marriage but fits into the nation’s overall trends.
The Blakes’ strong connection to their Irish heritage is apparent when the family sings The Parting Glass, "a good Irish tradition" that the family has done for generations. The song began as a Scottish or Irish folk tune, often called Goodnight and God Be With You. Many versions exist, but the most famous is a 1959 recording by the Clancy Brothers, an Irish folk group. Interestingly, the wording the Blake family uses in the first verse differs from the many published versions of the song. They sing “Oh all the money that ere I had / I lost it in good company,” while others use “I spent it in good company,” hinting that the Blakes don’t feel agency over their financial lives.

Each member of the Blake family struggles with money in a different way. Deirdre and Erik both went into blue collar professions right out of high school and were able to support themselves.

The older Blakes’ work struggles made it important that their daughters earn college degrees. Brigid, who chose a private college rather than the state school her parents had in mind, has large student loans to pay back. In 2013, 69% of graduating seniors had student loans, and the average debt was $28,400. Compare that to 2003, when Aimee graduated. That year, 64.5% of graduating seniors had student loans, and the average debt was $18,630.

Reprinted with Permission from Roundabout Theatre Company’s UPSTAGE Playgoer’s Guide.
Stephen Karam set out to write a play about the existential fears that terrorize our nights, prickling our souls with questions that may never be answered. He had been thinking about the thick fear that settled over Americans after 9/11 and again after the Great Recession. With these two cataclysmic events, American life became a stew of anxieties: political, personal, cultural, and financial. With Sigmund Freud’s essay, “The Uncanny” on his mind, Karam wanted to delve into the questions of why some stories fill us with greater sense of dread and horror than others, and why sometimes things that are familiar become very unsettling and strange.

Originally intending to write a thriller—similar to *Deathtrap* or *Dark at the Top of the Stairs*—Karam invested each of his six characters with a combination of fears, setting in motion a play fueled by dread. Yet somehow his characters developed minds of their own and they insisted that the play be driven by empathy, humor, and compassion instead. The result was *The Humans*, a play with a boisterous, loving heart and an uneasy soul.

The gathering of the Blakes on Thanksgiving Day will be recognizable to anyone whose family celebrates holidays together: full of teasing and laughter, tender support, unwanted advice, hurt feelings, oddball traditions, and the complicated bonds of family, it could be any American home movie. The Blakes clearly love each other deeply and will always have each other’s back, but that doesn’t mean they can resist the urge to be cruel. Joe Mantello, who directed the premiere at New York’s Roundabout Theatre Company in 2015, said of *The Humans*, “This is what love looks like: tender, vicious, hopeful, kind.”

The Blakes gather in youngest daughter Brigid’s and her boyfriend Richard’s as-yet unfurnished new apartment. Brigid’s parents Erik and Deirdre, along with her sister Aimee, and their dementia-ridden grandmother Momo, have come to celebrate the holiday on folding chairs and paper plates. Not yet a home, the apartment isn’t really comfortable for anyone—there aren’t many places to sit, necessities and comforts are still in packing boxes, light bulbs seem to have a mind of their own. Just outside the apartment walls, unseen things thud and creak, and strange shadows flicker past the windows. It’s probably just the neighbors, and yet...

The idea of the uncanny has been explored by many psychologists, including Ernst Jentsch, who wrote in 1906 about fears that create “doubts [of] an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might be, in fact, animate.” Freud’s ideas of it focused in part on the uneasiness experienced when something very familiar—such as a light bulb burning out—seems to have a hidden meaning.
For Erik Blake especially, the strange animation of Brigid’s new apartment is distressing. It is clear from the beginning that he is under secret stresses; snatches of overheard conversations with Deirdre hint at something urgent that he must reveal to his daughters today; he confides in Richard a recurring nightmare about a faceless woman. Are the strange disturbances of the apartment somehow expressions of his personal turmoil? The thumping from upstairs, the burnt-out light bulb, and the rumbling of the trash compactor are all normal occurrences—especially for a New York apartment—but they rise and fall through the play in just eerie enough ways that they seem unnatural. The strange disturbances are only minutely off: natural but unnatural at the same time. Compounded with Erik’s own inner turmoil they become uncanny expressions of human life in ways we are intimately familiar with.

In The Humans, Stephen Karam offers a tender, funny examination of a middle class American family. Although each one wrestles with personal fears and struggles to be happy with a not-quite-successful life, they have each other to lean on for comfort and confidence. Even when the mysterious, inchoate world threatens, as Erik says, “The Blakes bounce back, that’s what we do.”
The struggles of the family central to The Humans, the Blakes, might seem familiar to many folks these days, especially for members of white middle-class families. Erik and Deirdre face economic hardship regardless of their hard work and their daughters Aimee and Bridgid struggle as well despite their education and initiative. For the Blakes, the American Dream is not turning out as expected.

The idea of the American Dream arose before the Great Depression. At that time, it centered on immigrants moving to a new country for limitless opportunities, and the resulting cultural melting pot. The phrase “American Dream” was first used in a 1931 study on the effects of class on how Americans live and think about their lives.

Idolizing the American Dream stems from the persistence of character that working and middle-class families of the Depression era possessed. This idea was revitalized both during and after World War II as the nation rallied to support the troops fighting overseas. As the war ended and the soldiers came home, the American Dream shifted slightly. Now the focus was on obtaining the “perfect American household,” complete with a nice house in the suburbs, a steady job, marriage, and children. In this post-war resilience and rebuilding, U.S. citizens started thinking of the future and the possibilities it held. This was beneficial for middle-class families, they worked hard and it paid off – until the Great Recession of 2007.

When the Recession hit, the idea of the American Dream became less viable as Americans scrambled to stay afloat during economic hardships. Culturally and socially this caused the system – that they had put so much faith in – to fail middle-class Americans. According to the American Dream mindset, hard work and perseverance lead to limitless success, while poverty is synonymous for laziness and carelessness. Prosperity is within everyone’s grasp, and many “opportunities” are waiting if you never give up. Yet, since 2007, about one-third of the American middle class has fallen into poverty, or are one paycheck away from poverty. This has resulted in the bitter social divides we are now experiencing.

At its finest, the American Dream can be inspirational but it’s still problematic and generally rooted in a falsehood. In reality the advent of American social mobility is among the lowest in the developed world. We sell ourselves as the Land of Opportunity; however, a child born impoverished in the U.S. is more likely to remain in poverty than any other comparable nation in the world. In contrast, it’s estimated that 40% of the billionaires in America inherited a sizable portion of their wealth. Despite these facts, the insistence that the U.S. is a meritocracy is so deeply ingrained within us that we have internalized the idea that we are all exactly where we deserve to be. In this American Dream story, success is not due to privilege or luck but our own determination and hard work.
For the Blakes this hits particularly hard. Erik and Deidre have worked hard all their lives in order to provide a better future for their daughters but this has fallen short of what was promised. The fact is that good jobs are progressively scarce, rent is sky high, livable wages are decreasing to poverty levels – all of which are rooted in difficult circumstances and systemic obstacles.

Yet the subtle insistence that we all should industriously reach for greatness can be mentally corrosive, and the Blakes feel completely responsible for their failings. The constant unrealistic mantra of “you can be anything you want to be” has manufactured a sense of inadequacy and anxiety in American life.

Erik and Deidre are dealing with the realization that they are stuck even though they’ve done everything right, and their daughters are dealing with the disillusionment of the system as a whole. This causes arguments between them but ultimately they continue to adapt and persevere, regardless of everything else they are capable of surviving – which is perhaps the newer, more viable American Dream.

-Logan is an intern in Artists Rep’s Dramaturgy department.
The Blake family gathers for Thanksgiving in their daughter Brigid’s new apartment in this warm yet piercing comedy. Brigid is trying hard to find a job in music, working two bartending gigs while applying to internships, and she recently moved in with her boyfriend Richard in Manhattan. Richard’s earnest charm makes him a family favorite, although they are slightly uncomfortable with his wealthy upbringings. Aimee is the other Blake daughter, a lawyer with chronic bowel problems, struggling through a painful breakup with her long time girlfriend. Erik is their father, who has a warm sense of humor and a positive attitude. His wife Deirdre is endlessly worried for their daughters, and finds solace from her dead-end job in her Catholic faith. Momo is Erik’s mother, afflicted by dementia and rambling incoherently from time to time. From the very beginning, the air is uncanny and off-kilter, with unexplained noises coming from the upstairs neighbors, all of which are very disturbing to Erik, perhaps because of his frightening recent dreams. He and Deirdre argue quietly about something he is supposed to tell Aimee and Bridget.

The family blesses both floors of the apartment with joyful Irish toasts and funny family traditions, finding happiness in ritual. Aimee bemoans the fact that her uncooperative colon will require surgery and is impairing her romantic and career prospects: her law firm took her off the partner track because of her illness, and getting a new girlfriend seems irreconcilable with the possibility of needing a colostomy bag. It seems like the world is conspiring against her, which is how Brigid feels about being unable to find a job that she is passionate about. Intermittently, light bulbs fritz out and weird thumps from above continue. Richard tries to detangle and interpret Erik’s confusing and vivid dreams about beckoning tunnels. Erik reveals to Richard that he missed being inside the Twin Towers on the morning of 9/11 by a matter of minutes, an experience that makes him worry about Bridget living in NY. At the dinner table, Momo, briefly coherent, joins in on grace to the excitement of all, and Brigid tells everyone that Richard will receive a trust fund in two years. The family smashes a peppermint pig as per a playful tradition and each proclaims for what they are thankful. Deidre reads aloud an old loving e-mail from Momo, giving voice to her haunting presence onstage. The family is happy and connected despite their stressful lives.

Finally, Erik confesses to his daughters that he was fired from his twenty-eight year job for a workplace affair, and their retirement plans are destroyed. Deirdre cannot leave her frustrating job and he has taken a job at Walmart. These revelations shake Brigid and Aimee, leaving them to reproach their parents. Momo becomes agitated in an unprecedented episode of anger, and Erik soothes hers and pacifies the air. He realizes that his recurring nightmares stem from the fear of losing his children in 9/11.

As the evening winds down, the whole family leaves the apartment, save Erik. He is left to contemplate his life when the disconcerting noises return, only more rapid and noticeable, and he is deeply disturbed as the images from his dreams come to fruition. Finally, he walks into the tunnel that in dreams was too frightening to enter.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What questions do you still have about the play? These can be anything from points of confusion to questions about certain choices made by the director, dramaturg or members of the production’s artistic team. They could also be questions related to issues that the play tackles such as content and themes.

- How did you perceive the characters’ relationships with one another in the play? Did you find yourself connecting with any of the characters? What do you think defines a family?

- What do you predict will occur after the conclusion of the play? What did you think about the ending of the play?

- What are your usual preconceptions about seeing a play? Did THE HUMANS deviate from your expectations?

- What are your thoughts on the mysterious/unexplained elements of the play? Real or imagined? Metaphor for something?

- Does your family practice any traditions around the holidays? What do they mean to you? Do you think you will continue them with your own family?