

HOSANNA
by Michel Tremblay
Translated by John Van Burek & Bill Glassco



Salvatore Antonio as Hosanna

“I think I’ll go to bed with my make-up on Cuirette...I’m afraid of what’s underneath.” (*Hosanna*, p. 31)

This study guide is aimed at students in grade 10 or higher. Michel Tremblay’s play, *Hosanna* deals with complex issues of gender and identity. While appropriate for high school classes, students will require a degree of maturity when approaching the material.

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Definition of the word, "Hosanna":

"An exceptional case, is that of the English word "hosanna" which is defined in English dictionaries as "an exclamation of praise, acclamation or adoration." Underlying the English form is the

Cuirette.

The Identity Project

Production History:

Michel Tremblay's *Hosanna* was first performed on May 10, 1973 at the Théâtre de Quat'sous in Montreal. Jean Archambault played the role of Hosanna and Gilles Renaud performed the role of

The first English production of *Hosanna* was in Toronto at Tarragon Theatre on May 15, 1974, starring Richard Monette in the title role and Richard Donat in the role of Cuirette. The production was directed by Bill Glassco, founder of Tarragon Theatre and the translation was by John Van Burek and Bill Glassco. The same production opened on Broadway at the Bijou Theatre in October, 1974. In 1987, Van Burek and Glassco revised their translation for a new production at Tarragon Theatre, directed by Richard Monette and starring Geordie Johnston as Hosanna and Dennis O'Connor as Cuirette.

There have been numerous other productions of *Hosanna* at regional theatres across Canada and around the world, in many languages, including Spanish, German, Japanese, Italian and Russian. *Hosanna* is widely considered to be one of Canada's greatest plays.

Synopsis:

Hosanna is a deceptively simple play about complex personal, social and political issues. Hosanna is a transvestite whose real name is Claude Lemieux, a small town boy who has made his way to Montreal to take on a new life and a new persona, one filled with extravagant dreams of glory. Claude makes his living as a hairdresser but at night he comes alive as Hosanna in the tawdry circuit of drag queens that, along with the hookers, pimps and drug addicts, would frequent the bars and strip clubs on Montreal's notorious "Main". Centred at the intersection of Blvd. St-Laurent and St. Catherine's St., this seedy part of town and its colourful demimonde has been used by Tremblay to great effect in several of his plays and novels from the seventies and eighties.

The play takes place late one Halloween night. It opens with Hosanna returning home in tears to her cheesy, cramped apartment. She enters wearing an elaborate Cleopatra costume that is extravagant and fantastic but also visibly homemade. Hosanna has been devastated by something but the audience does not know what.

Shortly, her partner Cuirette, an aging biker, arrives home laughing uproariously, which makes the audience wonder why their demeanours are so conflicting. They discuss an event that they have both just attended but are never specific about where they were or what happened. Hosanna repeats that she wishes she'd never gone, as she wrestles with her dress, trying to escape from the complicated outfit she has put together with countless hooks and buttons. She is very careful, however, not to ruin her make up.

As the couple reluctantly gets ready for bed they bicker about their relationship and the big and little lies they tell one another. The phone rings and it becomes clear that Hosanna's "friends" are continuing to harass her. As the night unfolds, we begin to understand that she has been handed a humiliating defeat and that Cuirette was party to the events. We come to realise that Hosanna had always dreamt of becoming the great American movie star, Elizabeth Taylor, in her celebrated, but gaudy role of Cleopatra, the Queen of the Nile. In other words, we have Claude Lemieux who has become Hosanna, who has become Elizabeth Taylor who became Cleopatra. The event tonight was a Halloween party where all the other queens, knowing of Hosanna's great dream, have dressed up as Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*. She has spent her whole life in anticipation of this triumphant moment, only to be crushed in humiliation as a comeuppance for her acid tongue and redoubtable bitchiness. This devastating experience leaves Hosanna to question who she is. The play is about Hosanna being forced to confront "her" sense of identity and as a consequence, her journey toward self-discovery. As such, it can be examined on a personal, social and political level.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES:

My association with *Hosanna* goes back to the early '70's when I first began to work with Michel Tremblay. He was still fairly unknown in English Canada, even though he was already a star playwright in Québec. I had seen his other plays to date and, together with Bill Glassco, had already translated *Forever Yours, Marie-Lou* and *Les Belles-Soeurs*, both of which had been huge hits in Toronto. I was completely won over by Tremblay's work and, like a great many theatre-goers in Québec and in Toronto, I was thrilled at each new play as he continued on his prolific journey. There was a raging power and a striking beauty in Tremblay's plays at that time, that left us all quite breathless. He was also becoming *the* Québec voice in a growing chorus of impressive Canadian playwrights who were bursting on the scene, including David Freeman, David French, John Murrell, James Reaney, George F. Walker and Carol Bolt. We were all very excited because, collectively, we were building Canadian theatre from the ground up. Tarragon Theatre was new, as was Theatre Passe-Muraille, Toronto Free (now part of CanStage), Factory Theatre and my own company, Théâtre français de Toronto. They were heady days, filled with passionate fervour for Canada's burgeoning culture and our new sense of self. Because of this, *Hosanna* rang out on many different levels, and this hasn't changed in the intervening years.

Today, I am just as excited to be directing *Hosanna* as I was to be working on it in 1974. Issues of identity and the painful confusion that surrounds them will never go away because it is human nature to be dissatisfied with ourselves and to imagine that other people are better and happier than we are. For example, few young people can walk out the door of their high school and tell themselves that they know who they are and that they are content with being themselves. We all live through those painful days of uncertainty about what our true persona is. The same holds true for societies and for countries. How often we think we are inadequate compared to some other group or people. We are not as rich, not as successful, not as important or powerful as other lands; we work too hard while other people live the good life. Once we have travelled and lived elsewhere, we see that this is nonsense, but without that first hand experience, it is so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that "if only I were someone else", or *somewhere* else, things would be so much better. There is perhaps no better image of this fantasy-like thinking than what is represented by the huge Hollywood dream machine. Hosanna has certainly bought into it, big time! Claude Lemieux has come from his small town to the big city in order to find happiness as Hosanna, who in turn spends her life dreaming of being Elizabeth Taylor, playing Cleopatra. This is quite a stack of identities and it's no wonder Hosanna no longer knows who or what she/he is. Fortunately for all of us, Hosanna is blessed with a wicked sense of humour, including the ability to laugh at herself, and this makes her journey through her maze of masks all the more touching.

I very much look forward to welcoming teachers and their students to the theatre – all part of our outreach program– and to having you see this magnificent Canadian classic. It stars **Salvatore Antonio**, as Hosanna and **Jean-Stéphane Roy** as Cuirette. These two young men rank among Canada's most exciting new theatre talents. Salvatore, who grew up in Markham, in a very traditional Italian-Canadian family, did drama at Unionville High School before going on to the National Theatre School of Canada. He has since had great success as an actor and a playwright, on stage and in television. Jean-Stéphane was raised in Montréal. Theatre was his salvation from a difficult childhood and, after training at a CEGEP in Montréal, he has channelled his creative talents to become one of the finest, most exciting actors and directors of his generation, in both French and English. Also, a reminder that *Hosanna* has not been seen in Toronto for almost twenty years so there is a whole new discovery to be made now.



Approaching the Play

Hosanna deals with complex issues that should be examined by young people,

although students will need to demonstrate maturity while working on the play. Teachers should encourage students to speak freely on the topics explored.

Culminating activity:

Students will write and perform an original monologue based on their identity. Throughout the unit as students explore the nature of Hosanna's identity they will also consider the nature of their own identity. The monologue should be memorized and students should be encouraged to use props and costumes. Evaluations throughout the unit can be formative but the final project should be evaluated as summative.

Consider the context:

Hosanna was first performed in May of 1973. Just three years earlier Quebec and the whole of Canada lived through one of the most trying political times in our history, The October Crisis, in which two prominent political figures were kidnapped by terrorists in Montreal and one of them was murdered. In the course of the 1960's, Québec had been going through what came to be known as the Quiet Revolution. This profound transformation of Québec society, which had been brewing for years, would change the province from a backward, Church-ridden society in which the French language and culture were relegated to second class status by an Anglophone minority, to a modern, creative community that sought to raise its head proudly. It carried with it a growing wave of sentiment calling for independence for Québec from the rest of Canada, a movement that is still lingering in the province's politics today. Unfortunately, the pressure of history was such that parts of this revolution were anything but quiet. There had been violent demonstrations in the streets, even terrorist bombs in mailboxes, and it all came to a head in October of 1970 when members of the Front de Libération du Québec kidnapped James Cross and then Pierre Laporte. Laporte was killed while Cross was ultimately set free. It was under these circumstances that the then Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, invoked the controversial War Measures Act in order to maintain order, save the hostages and to find those responsible for the terrorist activities. Paradoxically, in the name of freedom, all rights were suspended and an entire domestic population was held hostage by the Montréal Police and the Canadian military. There were flagrant abuses of power and to this day, the issue is hotly debated by historians. It has remained a dark spot in our nation's past and an abiding source of resentment amongst many Québécois.

The FLQ was a radical group that went to extreme measures to defend the unique identity of the Québécois. ***Hosanna*** is not only a play about personal identity but also a political metaphor meant to reveal truth about the Québécois identity and how the people of Québec feel about their place in Canadian society.

Activity 1: Research the background.

Expectations

THV.03 · describe how the style, genre, and historical and cultural background of a piece of theatre influence production decisions.

ANV.04 · analyse the social and cultural impact of dramatic arts.

AN1.05 – explain how Canadian theatre interprets and reflects Canadian issues and concerns.

AN1.06 – explain how dramatic arts contribute to and represent culture and society, both locally and internationally.

TH3.03 – describe the historical and cultural origins of the dramatic literature chosen for exploration.

In this activity students will investigate where the play comes from, why it was a significant play at the time it was first produced and why the play continues to be significant today. Using the school library, internet, CBC online archives, and interviews etc. students will research the historical context that surrounds the world of the play.

Learning Strategy: The Jigsaw.

The jigsaw is a cooperative learning strategy that provides opportunities for students to gain a variety of perspectives and insights by participating in a specialized group and then by sharing and integrating what they learned in their “home” group. The jigsaw is used to help students acquire an overview of a range of material or opinions. It enables expertise to be developed, recognized, and shared within a group and encourages a high level of student participation. The jigsaw supports risk taking and the development of interpersonal skills and abilities.

The Teacher:

- allows considerable time for students to understand the process;
- may use the jigsaw strategy primarily in two ways: (a) material is divided into sections, and each of the numbered groups is assigned a section to learn, explore, and then report to the home group; (b) the class shares a common learning experience, and the specialized groups take different approaches in analysing or responding to this experience (e.g., by creating a drama presentation, writing a

poem, posing a problem and presenting a possible solution for home group discussion);

- assesses student learning through continual observation and adjusts programming accordingly.

Study Questions:

What was happening politically in Québec in the 1960's and 1970's?

What was Montréal like culturally at this time period?

Who were important political figures at the time? What contributions did they make to Québécois society that is still important today?

What was The Quiet Revolution?

How do the Québécois define their "distinct society?"

How did English Canada view Québec in the 1960's 1970's? How does English Canada view Québec today? (Culturally, politically)

How was *Hosanna* received? What are the political implications of producing a play like *Hosanna* (in Québec or in English Canada or internationally)?

The Opening:

Reading the Stage directions

AN1.02 – defend the artistic choices made in productions (e.g., by writers, technicians, designers, or directors).

CR1.07 – research a contemporary style of theatre before creating and presenting a theatre piece in that style.

Michel Tremblay provides the reader, actor, designer with very specific opening stage directions. Just as Hosanna's costume reflects how she feels about herself on the inside, her apartment is another reflection of her identity. Identify and explain how the physical objects and the room itself reflect Hosanna's personality and her struggle.

Students may work in groups to "mine" the text for clues about Hosanna from the objects in her apartment. Students should report their findings orally to the class.

Consider how a playwright might create a character like Hosanna.

In the following lesson students will examine the external signifiers of identity. Before beginning a discussion of what makes us and who we are, have students participate in the following exercise to help them identify how they express themselves.

Expectations for this Exercise:

CR1.05 – demonstrate an understanding of the function of the playwright in the development and scripting of an original scene or dramatic presentation.

ANV.03 - analyse the personal, social, and cultural impact of dramatic arts.

Personal character sketch:

On a 6Ft. sheet of butcher or craft paper students will lie down on the paper and have a partner trace the outline of their body. Using crayons, pencil crayons, markers, pastels, magazine cut-outs, photographs etc. students will create visual representations of things that they relate to and associate these symbols with appropriate parts of the traced body. For example if I consider my family to be an important part of my life I might paste a family portrait on the spot where my heart would be on the outline of my body. Students are encouraged to think about what makes them who they are. The following questions can be posed to help them along with the process:

Where do I live?

What/who do I love? How do I show love?

Who are my friends?

What kind of clothes (brands, styles) do I wear?

What kind of perfume/cologne do I like?

What kind of music do I listen to?

Where do I spend most of my time?

What kind of food do I like?

What kind of jewellery do I wear?

What kind of car do I like?

These questions are meant to stimulate students' thoughts on how whatever they may portray on the outside can reveal who they are on the inside and that the two might be contradictory.

Exercises intended to generate creative writing for the culminating activity: (Ideas and exercises from One Yellow Rabbit's Denise Clarke)

Physical Vocabulary

CR1.02 – convey character through the effective use of movement techniques

Have students write ten sentences about who they are. When students have completed this task they are to begin a physical exploration of these sentences by attributing a gesture to each sentence. In this initial exploration students are

encouraged to use a full range of motion, making gestures that are big and expansive. When students have attributed a gesture to each sentence they should begin memorizing each movement in order to create a “physical vocabulary.” After the physical vocabulary is memorized students are encouraged to experiment with size of motion, tempo and pace of the movements. Gestures can range in motion from over the top where kids take up as much space as possible to small concise movements that look almost like sign language. Students can express emotion in their face but should not use language at this point.

*Making a distinction between being personal and being confessional

Working on a personal project like this can be intimidating for some students. The next part of the exercise is intended to safeguard students from creating a monologue that is too personal to be shared.

The Cut-up

CR1.04 – create characters, using suggestions or notes provided by the director and peers, and demonstrating further insight into the characters in subsequent rehearsals and performances.

CRV.02 - carry out all aspects of rehearsal effectively, working in collaboration with others.

Students will take a copy of their ten sentences and cut it up with scissors sentence by sentence. Next they will mix up the strips of paper and then rearrange the ten sentences into random order. This random order will sound strange and can come out funny. Because the order has been disrupted students will feel somewhat detached from their original ten sentences. Each student should read their cut-up aloud for the class. The class will be listening for interesting word combinations and anything that sounds like poetry. After each person reads their cut-up, classmates will give feedback to the reader. A few of these poetic moments should find their way into the character sketch and eventually into the final monologue.

The Glosa

Writing a glosa (a poetic form originally from Spain) is a very constructive way to have students generate dramatic writing.

Have students write a quatrain about the purpose of their lives. The quatrain can (but does not have to) follow a rhyming scheme. When students are finished with their quatrains they begin putting together their glosa. Student will write four verses made up of ten lines. The last line of each verse is a line from the quatrain

i.e. the first line of the quatrain makes up the last line of the first verse, the second line of the quatrain makes up the last line of the second verse etc. The only rule of the glosa is that in each verse lines six, nine and ten must rhyme (so that the last two lines are a rhyming couplet and line six rhymes with the last two lines.) The quatrain is meant to serve as a theme for the other lines that will be created in the poem.

At the end of these exercises students will have forty lines of writing from their glosa and ten sentences from their cut-up from which to pull from for their final monologue.

Culminating Activity: Performed Monologue

CR2.03 – create and present an original dramatic piece, choosing from a variety of dramatic forms, processes, and theories;

CR2.03 – apply the conventions of rehearsal and production (e.g., warming up the voice and body, recording and assimilating the director’s notes, remaining silent backstage during dramatic presentations);

CR1.02 – convey character through the effective use of voice and movement techniques;

For the culminating activity in the Identity Project students will perform the monologue they have created from the writing they have worked on over the past few lessons. Students will evaluate their own writing or may work in pairs to construct the monologue. The monologue should be about 2-3 minutes and memorized for the performance.

Evaluation:

The performance task is an assessment strategy in which students create, produce, perform, or present, in ways that engage “real world”, meaningful, and substantive issues or problems.

The teacher:

- observes the student performing a specific task;
- shares with the student the responsibility of developing and organizing the performance task, and setting the assessment criteria;
- makes assessment criteria (e.g., attached rubric) available to students before the beginning of the task;
- provides models of achievement;

- provides comprehensive feedback to students about their achievement;
- assigns a level of proficiency based on the performance.

Self-assessment:

- promotes the development of meta-cognitive ability (the ability to reflect critically on one's own reasoning);
- may involve an introspective observation;
- may include attitude surveys, interest inventories, and personal journals;
- involves such questions as "How do I learn best?", "What are my areas for growth?", "Where do I need to improve?";
- is used to determine whether a student's beliefs about his or her performance correspond with the actual performance observed by the teacher.

Comments about the process

Comments about the performance

Teachers can conduct one on one interviews with students to compare teacher and student perceptions of the work once the project is completed or throughout the process.