St. Nicholas
by CONOR MCPHERSON
Directed by SIMON EVANS

Performed at GOODMAN THEATRE
January 9 through January 29, 2019

CONTENTS

2 Introduction to the St. Nicholas Study Guide
4 Synopsis of St. Nicholas
6 Tips for Watching Theatre Online
8 Discussion Questions for Video Excerpt 1: The Critic
9 Discussion Questions for Video Excerpt 2: The Vampires
11 Discussion Questions for Video Excerpt 3: William’s Story
12 The “Players” of St. Nicholas: Playwright, Producer, Performer
13 We Deserve to See More Black Vampires on the Screen

Editors Quenna L. Barrett, Liam Collier, Sam Mauceri
Production Managers Liam Collier, Sam Mauceri
Designer Liam Collier
Contributing Writers Quenna L. Barrett, Liam Collier, Andrew Keahey, Sam Mauceri, Willa J. Taylor, Abby Wesley
I have been obsessed with vampires ever since I first read Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* back when I was in junior high school. My mother, a school librarian, would let me select any books I wanted to read over the summer. She and I would read them together and discuss in our own private book club. She was not a fan of it at all, but being the educator she was, she made me research the origins of the book, taught me about myths and legends in literature and lore, and got up at night to comfort me when I was too scared to sleep.

Then in high school I discovered that Stoker’s book had been adapted for the movies! The 1931 film starring Bela Lugosi, had become a staple of what passed as late-night television back then (all TV went off the air at midnight!) and I was determined to see it. I knew that my friend Cloteal’s mom worked late and that if we had a sleepover at her house, we could watch anything we wanted because her grandmother – who would be babysitting us – would be asleep before 10pm.

The film overwhelmed me. Lugosi’s mesmerizing incarnation of the Count established the vampire in my mind as a supernatural, sexy beast. It is his interpretation – honed by more than 300 stage performances of *Dracula* – that set the standard for the charming, charismatic character we see on screens today.

The mythology of vampires, of immortal creatures that drink the blood of their victims and only come out at night, is one of enduring evil. Vampire
superstition thrived in the Middle Ages, especially as the plague decimated entire towns because the disease often left behind bleeding mouth lesions on its victims, which to the uneducated was a sure sign of vampirism.

And, of course, mythology itself is as old as spoken language. Rooted in culture and tradition, myths reflect the universal concerns of humans throughout history: birth, death, the afterlife, the origins of humans and the world, good and evil, and the nature of being human. Myths tap into our ubiquitous cultural narratives and the collective wisdoms of humankind. Origin stories, hero quests, paradise... these themes show up across countries, across peoples, and across cultures. Think about the stories you’ve heard about great floods, or the origins of places. Or how you family became your family.

Then there are our familial myths, the stories we tell at the barbeque about how Aunt Esther picked up that car, or how Cousin Joe learned how to play guitar. These are the tales that make us laugh, help us understand our connections to our family, teach us our history, and remind us who we are.

“Vampires represent the ultimate malevolence: selfish, cruel and violent. And because Dracula still retains his power, even in the modern world, his story is a lesson in the enduring power of evil and our continuous struggle to defeat it.”

Dracula illustrates the conflict between the old ways and modernity which is one of the reasons why it is such an abiding story. Vampires represent the ultimate malevolence: selfish, cruel and violent. And because Dracula still retains his power, even in the modern world, his story is a lesson in the enduring power of evil and our continuous struggle to defeat it.

It is the perfect tale for our time.
Synopsis of St. Nicholas
by LIAM COLLIER

Act 1

Alone in an abandoned room, a nameless narrator reflects on his childhood fear of vampires. He insists that “real” vampires are nothing like the monsters he imagined in his youth, though they are equally terrifying.

The narrator explains that, before he met the vampires, he was a widely respected theatre critic in Dublin, famous for his negative reviews. He had tried his hand at writing, but, unable to come up with ideas for a story, he made a career out of criticizing the work of others. A bitter alcoholic, the narrator was unable to find anything that made him truly happy, except for his daughter, whom he can’t bring himself to speak to.

Rather than spend time with his family, the narrator would pass his hours getting drunk with other journalists. He describes the pattern he fell into: drinking each night, waking up with a hangover, reviewing “another amateur disaster,” and returning to the bar. With the scene set, the narrator begins his story: “It was a girl that got me in trouble.”

He first sees this woman, Helen, when he attends an amateur production of Salome, and upon seeing her dance, he falls for her instantly. After the show, he quickly composes a mixed review and follows Helen to a bar where the cast is celebrating their opening night. To curry favor with the crowd, the narrator lies about his review, calling the production “one of the best shows [he’s] seen in years.” At the end of the night, he drives Helen home, where she kisses him goodnight and leaves him alone.

Unable to garner any positive reviews in Dublin, the production of Salome moves to London for an abbreviated run. Without saying goodbye to his family, the narrator follows.

Upon arriving in London, the narrator makes his way to the theatre, stopping at several pubs on the way. Drunkenly, he follows Helen to a home in the country where she is staying with her director and some fellow actresses. He tries to convince them that he has resigned from the paper.
because his editor changed the review he wrote of *Salome*. No one seems to believe him, but the director offers him the couch to sleep on.

The narrator wakes early the next morning, still drunk, and searches the house for Helen. When he finds her sleeping, he is reminded of his daughter. Deflated, he leaves the house, walking for hours until he collapses in a suburban park.

The narrator wakes up at dusk to find a pale man approaching him. He introduces himself as William, and, with an almost supernatural charm, suggests that the narrator follow him “back to civilization”. Suddenly unable to form thoughts of his own, the narrator obeys.

**Act II**

William and the narrator take a taxi to an old suburban house. Once inside, William offers the narrator a drink and makes him an offer: In exchange for food, drink, and space to write, the narrator would lure young people back to the house for the vampires to feed on. William explains:

“No one dies, we only take what we need, they don’t become like us.”

The narrator agrees to the offer.

They go on to discuss how many common beliefs about vampires, such as their aversion to garlic, sunlight, and the bible, are merely superstitions. William confesses that one rumor is true: faced with a pile of rice, a vampire will feel compelled to count every grain.

On his first night out, the narrator realizes he possesses the same supernatural charm that William used to lure him to the old house in the first place. He easily seduces a group of young people, who follow him back to William. The vampires feed, but, as promised, the group wakes the next morning unharmed, remembering nothing from the night before.

A new pattern emerges for the narrator: going to the bars each night, luring a group of young people back to the vampires, and sending them on their way the next morning. In the midst of this new life, the narrator begins writing again, but he is frustrated by William’s constant, unwarranted advice.

One day, William tells the narrator a story of a woodsman who comes across a magical watch that allows him to travel back in time. He ignores the device for years, until his wife dies. The woodsman uses it to travel back in time to see her again, but he becomes obsessed, traveling further and further back until one day he goes to see her as a child. When he does, he becomes trapped in the past. He tries to steal the child for himself, but is chased down by the townspeople and beaten.

William is unable to explain what the story means, which leads the narrator to realize that the key difference between humans and vampires is their capacity for self-reflection. The narrator becomes disgusted with the vampires, and, one night, in a fit of rage, smashes a jar of rice on the floor, forcing the creatures to count every grain.

As they count, the narrator decides to go out to the bars one final time, but, instead of the usual crowds of strangers, he runs into Helen. Still endowed with the vampire’s charm, the narrator, for the first time, has Helen’s full attention. He decides to bring her and her friends back to the old house and keep her under his spell.

When the narrator arrives back at the house, he quickly loses track of them. For the first time, one of the vampires bites the narrator. Covered in blood, he tracks down Helen, whom William has placed under his spell. The narrator insists that he is leaving with Helen, and William does not resist. He leaves the narrator with the parting message: “You won’t be happy.” To which the narrator responds “Probably not, but it wouldn’t be much fun if I was.”

And so, the narrator returns to Dublin, finally, with a story to tell.
Tips for Watching Theatre Online
by LIAM COLLIER

The performance that you are about to watch was not designed for the screen.

Unlike the writers behind your favorite TV show, Conor McPherson, the playwright for *St. Nicholas*, did not imagine you watching his play from the safety of your home. And, despite his wealth of on-camera experience, Brendan Coyle, who plays the narrator in *St. Nicholas*, was likely more concerned with the audience in the room that night than with his future viewers.

Theatre, at least prior to March 2020, was always meant to be experienced in-person.

Just as the blurry videos of a concert posted to social media will never compare to the live event, a recording of a piece of theatre will never be quite the same as the real thing.

Which is all a roundabout way of saying: you are about to watch something imperfect.

With this in mind, here are some steps we recommend you take to give yourself a more fulfilling theatrical experience:

**Before you begin**

- **Imagine the space.**
  The Owen Theatre, where *St. Nicholas* was performed, is a 350 seat courtyard style theatre. On the night of a performance it would have been full of bustling audience members sitting together in the dark. If you can, dim the lights in your space.

- **Set aside any distractions.**
  Theatre often expects its audience’s full attention. Unlike TV shows which you can pause and return to, plays build tension by
asking audiences to lean in and listen closely. If you’re able to, go to a space where you can watch alone, use headphones if you have any, and silence your cellphone for a moment so you can focus on the performance.

As You Watch

- **Listen to the audience.** At times during the recording you’ll hear the audience react to what’s happening on stage. Rather than let that distract you, think of it as a part of the theatrical experience.

- **Consider what you’re missing.** As you watch the videos provided think about what aspects of the performance you cannot access through the screen. What might lie just outside the camera frame that you cannot see? Are there sounds, smells, sensations that you would experience if you were in the space?

After You Watch

- **Reflect on your experience.** Did you enjoy what you watched? If you did, amazing! What moments would you have enjoyed seeing live?

If not, what moments or aspects of the performance did you find off-putting? Would seeing the performance live have impacted your experience?

Right now, the theatre community is figuring out what it means to exist in a virtual space. For many of us, this is a brand new experience. As we navigate this uncertainty, we look forward to the day when audiences will be able to join us in-person again.

Until then, thank you for being part of this journey with us.
Discussion Questions for Video Excerpt 1: The Critic
by SAM MAUCERI

The following questions were written to accompany an excerpt from Act I of “St. Nicholas” provided to schools in the School Matinee Series.

1. The critic exhibits behaviors that could be called toxic masculinity. What is toxic masculinity?

Researchers from the American Psychological Association have defined toxic masculinity as a set of behaviors and beliefs that include the following:

- Suppressing emotions or masking distress
- Maintaining an appearance of hardness
- Violence as an indicator of power (think: “tough-guy” behavior)

As explained in the New York Times, “Toxic masculinity is what can come of teaching boys that they can’t express emotion openly; that they have to be “tough all the time”; that anything other than that makes them “feminine” or weak. (No, it doesn’t mean that all men are inherently toxic.)”

What evidence of toxic masculinity do you see in the following passage from St. Nicholas?

And my wife would make some lunch for me. And she would sit with me. She wanted me to say something. And I could taste her care. And I’d munch it down. What are you going to do? You’ve got to keep it in, haven’t you?
2. What other examples do you see in this excerpt of the critic expressing toxic masculinity? When does he suppress his emotions? How does he treat women?

3. The critic describes the lives, ambitions, and intellects of his two children in the section below:

   My girl was at college. I loved her. I loved her in that way I couldn’t look her in the eye, you know? I couldn’t find the words. It was too late. I just left money on the kitchen table every week. Apparently she was a brilliant student and I suspected she was a writer but I don’t think I could have faced it if she was. You know? I avoided her...

   And then I’d hear my boy come in. He did nothing and I supported it. All I knew was he stank of deodorant and he had some fruitless ambition to be a musician.

Describe the differences in how the critic talks about his son and his daughter. How does he support or discourage their ambition? Why do you think he treats them differently?

4. A common character type in literature and other media is the **anti-hero**.

   Oxford Reference defines the anti-hero as “a central character in a narrative or drama who lacks the admirable qualities of fortitude, courage, honesty, and decency that are usually possessed by traditional heroes. [...] Note that the anti-hero is not the antagonist or villain.”

   Some common examples of anti-heroes include Walter White from *Breaking Bad*, Don Draper from *Mad Men*, and Deadpool.

   Do you find stories featuring anti-hero characters compelling? Why or why not?

5. List other anti-hero characters you can think of. What do these characters have in common? Do they share any characteristics? Wants or needs? Identities or demographic traits?
Discussion Questions for Video Excerpt 2: The Vampires
by SAM MAUCERI

The following questions were written to accompany an excerpt from Act II of “St. Nicholas” provided to schools in the School Matinee Series.

1. List at least 5 superstitions you know about vampires from books, TV shows, movies, etc. What do they look like? What do they dislike or need to stay away from?

2. Pick one superstition or rule about vampires to research. What is the origin of that superstition? Is it from a book? Folklore? Has this superstition changed or evolved over time?

3. When writing fantasy, sci-fi, or other works of fiction, authors have to establish the “rules of the world” to make their fantastical stories consistent and believable. For instance, in Twilight, some of the rules of the world are that vampires remain the same age forever, vampires have skin that shimmers in the sunlight, and humans who are bitten by a vampire will transform into a vampire themselves.

What are the “rules of the world” for the vampires in St. Nicholas? What do they have the power to do?

4. The critic in St. Nicholas tells us that the vampires he encounters are more real than the vampires we see in movies. Why does he feel that the vampires he meets are more believable? Is he influenced by logic or something else?

5. The critic also criticizes those in the audience who don’t believe what he tells us about the powers of the vampires in the play:

There’s always going to be a smugness about you listening to this. As we all take part in this convention. And you will say, ‘These vampires are not very believable, are they?’ And you are entitled.

Do you feel that the rules of the world in the play are believable? Why or why not? Is it important that fantastical characters or situations are believable to an audience?

6. Write your own vampire superstition: First, make up one totally new rule of the world for vampires. This could be something totally ridiculous: “Vampires eat scrambled eggs for breakfast every day”. (Optional: Trade your rule of the world with a partner!)

Now, write a paragraph explaining this new rule of the world to your audience. What can make this superstition/fantastical element feel believable? Some things to consider:

- What are the consequences if this rule of the world is not followed?
- What is the origin story for this superstition?
- Does this apply to every vampire? Are there any exceptions?
Discussion Questions for Video Excerpt 3: William’s Story
by LIAM COLLIER

The following questions were written to accompany an excerpt from Act II of “St. Nicholas” provided to schools in the School Matinee Series.

1. Before he begins his story, William tells the narrator:

   The art object is different from every other object because it’s not for anything. A chair only is what it is because it’s for sitting on. A knife only is what it is because it’s for cutting. But art is for itself. Just as goodness is. It’s for its own sake.

   Do you think the playwright agrees with William? Do you agree with William? Why or why not?

2. One reason adults share fairy tales with children is to teach them important life lessons. For example, Little Red Riding Hood teaches children the importance of listening to their parents and not talking to strangers.

   Think of two fairy tales you enjoyed as a child. What lessons, or morals, did they teach?

3. When William finishes his story, the narrator asks him, “What does it mean?” William is unable to answer, but the story is not meaningless. What lessons or morals do you see in William’s story?

4. William’s story is full of symbolism. Pick two of the following objects or characters from the story:

   • The Woodsman
   • The Woodsman’s Wife
   • The Old Man in the Well
   • The Magic Watch
   • The Child
   • The Townspeople

   Who or what do you think these symbols represent? How do they relate to larger themes discussed in St. Nicholas?

5. At the end of this excerpt, the narrator discovers a new way to distinguish between humans and vampires.

   [William] didn’t know what his story meant. He knew he was supposed to be informed by it, but it was just a story that he told. A story about not being able to get back, and that was all. And that is what makes us different. We reflect. We reflect. They don’t. They see what they want, they get. Do anything to get it.

   Think back on all three excerpts. Does the narrator seem more like a human or a vampire to you? Why?
The “Players” of *St. Nicholas*:
Playwright, Producer, Performer
by QUENNA L. BARRETT

This article provides information on the major “characters” surrounding The Goodman’s production of St. Nicholas.

**Conor McPherson - Playwright**

Conor McPherson is an Irish writer and director for both stage and film, who has won numerous awards for his plays and whose work has been produced around the globe. In 2009, he received a Jeff Award (Chicago’s version of The Tony’s) for his play *The Seafarer* at Steppenwolf. *The Seafarer* also received critical acclaim in London before coming to the United States. His play *Shining City* was produced in the 2007/2008 season at the Goodman and was directed by Artistic Director Robert Falls. As in the case of the vampires in *St. Nicholas*, many of McPherson’s other plays also contain elements or themes dealing with the supernatural.

**The Donmar Warehouse - Producer**

*St. Nicholas* was first produced in London at the Bush Theatre in 1997. The production covered in this issue was revived at the Donmar Warehouse in London in September 2018. It then played in the Dublin Theatre Festival in October of that same year, and landed at the Goodman for its run in January 2019. The Donmar Warehouse considers itself an intimate space with 251 seats. In its 27 years of existence, it has received over 100 awards. The artistic director of the Donmar at the time of this production was Josie Rourke, an English film and theater director who was the first woman in this position at the Donmar. Rourke was also the first woman theatre director to hold such a title at any of London’s major playhouses.

**Brendan Coyle - Performer**

Brendan Coyle is the solo performer in *St. Nicholas*. Coyle is an English-Irish TV, film, and stage actor, and is known for playing Mr. Bates in the British television show *Downton Abbey*. He appeared in the 2019 film *Mary Queen of Scots*, which was directed by Josie Rourke. Coyle saw the original *St. Nicholas* production at the Bush Theatre while he was performing in another of McPherson’s plays, *The Weir*, for which he won an Olivier Award. Coyle will return to the Goodman in *Molly Sweeney*, which will be directed by Robert Falls.
This article was originally published in February 2019 by the Black Youth Project. It has been reprinted here with the author’s permission.

The image on the screen is always the same: a young woman, unsuspecting of any danger, twirls her hair and chats with a stranger. He’s always tall, he’s well-dressed and clearly of “good breeding”, and he’s always white. Pale white. The young woman’s thoughts ring clear, “Is this charming man a little too pale?”

Pale sophisticates; it’s all they ever are, and have been for years. Despite the fact that vampires have existed in various cultures all over the world, and have for hundreds of years, we really only hear about the one kind, don’t we? Most people will rarely, if ever, think about that, or consider why that has grown to be the norm.

A google search for the word “vampire” reveals an ocean of white faces, belonging not only to the vampires themselves, but also to the victims of these supernatural predators. Necks delicately bent to the side, awaiting the bite of death or eternal life. Because a white woman in a nightgown represents innocence to the world at large, and that fateful bite is seen as a corruption of that innocence.

Vampires apparently don’t know that Black people have blood, too. Or they do know, and white Hollywood just doesn’t have them drink it because they can’t fathom an audience sympathizing with the victim if she isn’t white. As a result, they keep the maiden one shade above pale, so the blood dripping down her neck really pops. It’s the stuff billion dollar film franchises are made of.

The whole vampire mythos is so commonly accepted
The short film *Suicide by Sunlight*, written and directed by Nikyatu Jusu, was selected to show at the Sundance Film Festival this year and was well-received with great enthusiasm. Jusu held the story in her head for some time — Valentina, a Black vampire, living and working in a near-future New York City and caught in a custody battle for her kids. When she pitched to the Tribeca Film Institute’s *Through Her Lens* program in 2017, she didn’t intend for it to be a short, but a whole series speaking on race and the struggles of a Black woman vampire able to walk in the sunlight thanks to the melanin in her skin. Based on the staggering reviews her 17-minute short is garnering, the future looks good for Jusu, a talented screenwriter and director who has been struggling to break into the mainstream due to the challenges that being a Black woman poses in Hollywood. Her vampire tale shows us that we don’t have to make the same story again and again just because it’s what people are used to. *Twilight’s* Edward Cullen spends his immortality going to high school over and over, and that’s what mainstream vampire tales feel like at this point. But when we take vampire lore and recognize that it belongs to the world, not just Europe, the results are visceral, beautiful, and wholly unique.

The Ewe people of Togo and Ghana have the legend of the Adze, a being that takes the form of a firefly, and feeds on the blood of human beings at night, causing them to get sick and die. It also has the power to control people’s bodies and can be changed back into human form if they’re captured in their insect form. The *Penanggalan* is a creature of Southeast Asian origin that is human during the day, but at night, their head detaches due to dark magic. The head flies around with the other organs trailing behind it, catching the light and shimmering like, again, fireflies. It’s said to smell of vinegar, and has sharp fangs which it uses to drain the blood of children and pregnant woman. At the end of the night, it re-attaches itself to its body, and becomes effectively human again. The *Asanbosam* of the Asante is said to have iron teeth, pink skin, long red hair, and iron hooks for feet, which it uses to pull its victims up into trees.

These myths aren’t recent creations, they’re part of vast folklore traditions dating back hundreds of years, and the ones listed here are only a few examples. There are many

“When watching horror, don’t assume you’re seeing everything, and certainly don’t draw the conclusion that all the stories about one particular subject have all been explored.”
more that you’ve never heard of, because it’s only recently that we’re able to bring our own stories and fairytales to the eyes of the world at large.

Many of these myths arose from cultures using stories to make sense of death and disease, which is universal. Fingernails and hair appearing to grow after death, people falling suddenly ill from bloodsucking creatures were used to explain malaria, and things like premature burial were attributed to the presence of the undead. This was happening all over the world, but we only focus on the one iteration.

However, like the ever inspiring rose growing from concrete, POC are finally able to put their own spin on the ever-popular idea of the vampire. Octavia Butler’s final novel was Fledgling, the story of a fifty-three-year-old vampire, appearing as an eleven-year-old child, who was the result of an experiment to create vampires with darker skin that could better handle exposure to the sun. It twists and changes vampires as we know them in a brand new take as only a master of the science fiction genre can spin it. A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night, a 2014 black and white film by Iranian-American director Ana Lily Amirpour, takes a lonely vampire woman in Iran and gives her more humanity and life than anything in a Twilight book or movie. It’s an amazingly shot, semi-romantic whirlwind of cool that you need to see to believe.

And I have not even mentioned yet those that came before; the ones that managed to break through when the whole of society fought against them. Like Ganja and Hess, a 1973 experimental horror film starring Duane Jones of Night of the Living Dead fame, described by film critic Scott Foundas as a “landmark 1973 indie that used vampirism as an ingenious metaphor for black assimilation, white cultural imperialism and the hypocrisies of organized religion.”

We would also be remiss to ignore 1972’s shining achievement in Blaxploitation, Blacula, which for years I had assumed was simple parody, but in reality is a stunning vampire film in its own right. The titular character, who was turned into a vampire by Dracula himself when, travels back to Transylvania with his wife as an African prince many years later to ask the count for help in suppressing the slave trade. The opening scene alone shows Blacula possessing such poise and dignity that it’s worth watching for those five minutes alone.

When watching horror, don’t assume you’re seeing everything, and certainly don’t draw the conclusion that all the stories about one particular subject have all been explored. There’s so much more to read, see, and hear, and in a greater volume with greater availability than ever. The vampire isn’t just some white man with a ruffled collar speaking with a European accent going around seducing dainty white ladies.

The vampire is a nebulous being that belongs to the world, and that will always be true, no matter how selective the storytelling of the gatekeepers. If you have such a story, put it out there. As long as you have blood in your veins, you’re able to change the narrative. Our spirits are just as real as theirs are, and our voices can be just as loud.

Andrew Keahey is a horror enthusiast and writer currently based in Austin, Texas. He’s been watching horror movies since he was far too young, and primarily writes essays, short fiction, and poetry. Find him on Twitter: @formaldehydefce

The Black Youth Project is a platform that highlights the voices and ideas of Black millennials. Through knowledge, voice, and action, the Black Youth Project works to empower and uplift the lived experiences of young Black Americans today.

More information at blackyouthproject.com