AT THE VANISHING POINT

by Naomi Iizuka

directed by Les Waters

original score by Ben Sollee

Jan. 27–Feb. 15
2015

PLAY GUIDE
ABOUT THIS PLAY GUIDE

This play guide is a resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts, and to encourage essential questions that lead to an enduring understanding of the play’s meaning and relevance.

Inside you will find information about the plot and characters within the play, as well as articles that contextualize the play and its production at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Oral discussion and writing prompts encourage your students to reflect upon their impressions and to analyze and relate key ideas to their personal experiences and the world around them. These can easily be adapted to fit most writing objectives. We encourage you to adapt and extend the material in any way to best fit the needs of your community of learners. Please feel free to make copies of this guide, or you may download it from our website: ActorsTheatre.org. We hope this material, combined with our pre-show workshops, will give you the tools to make your time at Actors Theatre a valuable learning experience.

AT THE VANISHING POINT STUDENT MATINEES AND THIS PLAY GUIDE ADDRESS SPECIFIC EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES:

- **Students will identify or describe a variety of roles needed to produce a dramatic performance.**

- **Students will analyze how time, place and ideas are reflected in drama/theatre.**

- **Students will explain how drama/theatre fulfills a variety of purposes.**

If you have any questions or suggestions regarding our play guides, please contact Jane B. Jones, Education Director, at 502.584.1265 ext. 3045.
PLOT SUMMARY

Naomi Iizuka returns with her beautifully observed portrait of Butchertown, one of Louisville’s oldest neighborhoods—intertwining memory and myth, ghosts of the past and snapshots of the present to give voice to a community. Based on extensive interviews and research on the rich history of Butchertown, At the Vanishing Point originally premiered in the 2004 Humana Festival, directed by Les Waters. A decade later, Iizuka and Waters revisit the banks of Beargrass Creek, creating an event that incorporates live original music by Kentucky native Ben Sollee.

SETTING

Louisville, Kentucky
CHARACTERS

By order of appearance within the play:

**PHOTOGRAPHER (GENE)** an optometrist, married to Maudie Totten’s sister Maddie, father of three.

**BEN SOLLEE** a cellist, plays himself.

**PETE HENZEL** former Fischer Packing Company employee, brother of Frank Henzel, nephew of Martin Kinflein.

**RONNIE MARSTON** Swift Packing Company employee, married to Jimmy, cousin to Pete and Frank, niece of Martin Kinflein.

**NORA HOLTZ** young student at Kentucky School for the Blind, daughter of Georg Holtz, Martin Kinflein’s sweetheart.

**MARTIN KINFLEIN** former accountant at Oertel Brewing Company; Frank, Pete and Ronnie’s uncle, Nora’s childhood sweetheart.

**A BOY** plays several roles.

**A GIRL** plays several roles.

**FRANK HENZEL** Fischer Packing Company employee, brother of Pete, cousin to Ronnie, nephew of Martin Kinflein, worked for Georg Holtz.

**MAUDIE TOTTEN** owns a tavern, married to Roy Totten, sister-in-law of Gene (the Photographer).
A lone boat floats down Louisville’s Main Street during the infamous flood of 1937. Photo courtesy of Metropolitan Sewer Collection, 1981.03, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.
Imagine having lived and worked in the same neighborhood your whole life. You’ve watched it grow and change as the years pass, your story one snapshot among many in an ever-evolving collage of neighbors, friends, and family. For the characters in Naomi Iizuka’s *At the Vanishing Point*, that neighborhood is Louisville’s historic Butchertown. Drawing inspiration from archival research, interviews with long-time residents, and the work of Kentucky photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Iizuka has crafted a finely detailed, yet remarkably fluid look at this close-knit community. In *At the Vanishing Point*, historical fact merges with fiction and local legend, music complements storytelling, and past and present intertwine.

The action of *At the Vanishing Point* is divided into two parts. In the first part, “self-portrait,” we meet the Photographer, who describes the tricks of his trade and sets the scene. The Photographer is loosely based on Meatyard, the Lexington photographer/optician known for taking photographs of his family (among other things) that feel simultaneously familiar and hauntingly strange.

The second half of the piece, “snapshots from a family album,” features a wide range of Butchertown inhabitants—a volunteer at the Thomas Edison House, an employee of the (now-defunct) Fischer Packing Company, a student at the Kentucky School for the Blind, and several others. Speaking from many different moments in time, they tell us their stories. We hear about what it’s like to butcher hogs, or brew beer; how they weathered the flood of 1937; their relationships with siblings, parents, and lost loves, both living and dead. As the play continues, the characters’ individual narratives intersect and overlap, until we’re swept up in a wave of shared moments and sensations. The result is a moving picture of one neighborhood as a microcosm of the variety and depth in the human experience.

Born out of Actors Theatre’s interest in developing work about Louisville, *At the Vanishing Point* premiered in the Humana Festival in 2004. Directed by current Artistic Director Les Waters (who’s also helming this production), it was staged in an abandoned Butchertown warehouse. But even though the script is based on real people, locations, and historical events, it’s not a documentary. “It’s set in Butchertown, and all the references are about Butchertown,” Waters explains, “but it wasn’t just a matter of going and taking down what people said and editing it together.” Rather *At the Vanishing Point* is Iizuka’s lyrical reshaping and reimagining of her diverse source material.

A decade later, in this season’s *At the Vanishing Point*, we meet many of the same characters and revisit some of the same stories. However, Iizuka and Waters emphasize that the new production is a further re-envisioning of the play, not a revival. In July of 2014, Iizuka returned to Louisville and pored through updated research, re-explored Butchertown on foot, and engaged in fresh conversations with locals to get a sense of what the neighborhood’s like now. She then rewrote or rearranged portions of the script, based on discussions with the creative team and her observations during her time here. “The piece is about the spirit of a place,” says Iizuka, “and what drew all sorts of different people to this extraordinary part of America.”
This season’s production is performed in the Pamela Brown Auditorium, coming to life with a new cast (with the exception of Actors veteran Bruce McKenzie, returning to play the Photographer) and a new design team. Since the show isn’t intended to be a docudrama, the design doesn’t attempt photo-realistic representation of *At the Vanishing Point*’s sources. “What we’re not trying to do is recreate Butchertown onstage,” Waters declares. Instead, Annie Smart’s set adopts an abstracted approach. It includes trees and grass, which evoke the characters’ descriptions of afternoons at the Point or by the banks of Beargrass Creek, placed amidst more industrial, metallic surfaces (an indirect nod to the neighborhood’s meat packing origins).

The play is also full of stunning visual sequences that bring a sensory immediacy to the stories we hear. “Visually, this should feel as if it’s going from something incredibly small to a torrent of images coming at you,” says Waters. “So it gets very very big and then settles down to something very still again. It’ll have a strong poetic quality, as if the past is trying to talk to us.”

In addition to the play’s poetic personal accounts and arresting moments of spectacle, 2015’s *At the Vanishing Point* features new musical accompaniment as well. In a rare treat for theatregoers, celebrated cellist and songwriter (and Lexington, Ky. native) Ben Sollee will appear onstage in every show. He’ll not only be performing original compositions written specifically for the production, but joining the cast, too; after meeting Sollee in Louisville this past summer, Iizuka wrote him into the script as a character.

What haven’t changed are the core elements that make Iizuka’s play such a rich, poignant, and enduring portrait of a place in time. In his opening monologue, the Photographer encourages us to look more closely at our surroundings, to examine with new eyes the people, the neighborhood, the life we thought we knew. That invitation is the frame for everything that follows—photography becomes a metaphor for the universal human desire to record and preserve our personal histories, and to capture the intangible things that connect us all. “I think this piece did start out being very consciously about photography,” Iizuka reflects. “But embedded in it from the beginning was something about family, loss, and transformation.” Indeed, *At the Vanishing Point* doesn’t just offer slices of life in Butchertown. The play beautifully embodies the elusive nature of our memories, in which the experience of a person or place might feel close enough to touch, yet simultaneously recedes into a dream-like distance.

—Hannah Rae Montgomery
While Naomi Iizuka’s *At the Vanishing Point* isn’t a docudrama, at its heart it’s a story—or, a richly interwoven web of many stories—about a specific local community. When she began this project, Iizuka was already no stranger to Louisville, having had three of her plays premiere in the Humana Festival (1997’s *Polaroid Stories*, 1999’s *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls*, and *War of the Worlds* in 2000). After returning here for an intensive research period, the playwright extrapolated from a mixture of interviews with residents, library materials, and her own experiences to pen her haunting portrait of Butchertown, one of the city’s oldest neighborhoods. In the following conversation about the piece, Iizuka, director Les Waters, and acclaimed Lexington musician Ben Sollee (who’s performing original compositions live during the show) reflect on why it’s so exciting—and so meaningful—to make art about and for this community.

**AN OPPORTUNITY TO COME TOGETHER: CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY IN AT THE VANISHING POINT**

NAOMI IIZUKA: I remember I first heard about Butchertown by happenstance, when I was exploring places around Actors Theatre. It became even more intriguing when I was able to visit the neighborhood in a sustained way, as opposed to just walking around it during a break. There was a place called Johnson’s Bait and Beer where I spent a lot of time—I would just go in there and strike up conversations, sometimes awkwardly.

I found that with most of the people I spoke to, there were lots of stories about the past, and there was a real dividing line between those who knew them and those who didn’t. So in a way, my role ended up being kind of surf between generations, or among different segments of the same community. There were people who were quite elderly and could remember what the area was like back before the freeway was put in, stuff like that; and then there were groups who were newer to Butchertown, but clearly still drawn to its history and very invested in being there.

It’s interesting because there’s this—it’s not “amnesia,” exactly, “amnesia” implies forgetting—but this way in which everyone has pieces of the puzzle, but one person might not know something that another person does. So when they come together it’s an opportunity. The play that emerged from my exploration of Butchertown is actually deeply personal to me for a lot of reasons, but in a way it also lives at the center of a very big wheel with lots of spokes.
LES WATERS: For me, this play is also deeply personal, because I was the child of rural working-class parents. When I became interested in theatre I was angry that there are certain communities that don’t see themselves onstage—my background wasn’t reflected in the theatre I was seeing. So one of the things I love about At the Vanishing Point is that it’s a look at a primarily working-class community, and a community in flux (because even though some people describe community as being a settled, established thing, I think that the notion of community is something that’s always morphing).

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I find the cultural figures from this state, like Ralph Eugene Meatyard, remarkable. Meatyard’s from Lexington, but is really identified as a Kentucky photographer. And in fact there was this extraordinary burst of people who came out of the area in the late ’60s and ’70s and all knew one another—there’s a series of Meatyard photographs of Thomas Merton, and they both knew Wendell Berry.

Since Naomi’s play has a character based on Meatyard, that’s a lot of what it’s about as well—that connection to a whole group of iconic figures in the arts.

BEN SOLLEE: When Les approached me about being involved in this production I was most attracted to the opportunity to pair sound with motion (one of my passions). As I learned about the play and the characters involved I got even more excited! Meatyard is one of my Kentucky heroes and the way Naomi weaves his philosophy into the seemingly ordinary lives of the Butchertown community’s past is exceptional.

NI: Yes, it’s also about history. You know, the secret history of places. If this piece can uncover something about the history of Louisville, or preserve it and remind us of it, then that’s a good thing.

LW: I hope that this is the beginning of a series of projects having to do with community. I look around at people next to me on the number four bus and think, who are these people? How did they get here? Let’s go, let’s see what we can create.

NI: That’s a big part of this work: creating connections between various parts of the community. With a play like At the Vanishing Point, its primary function or importance as a piece of art, or a set of stories, is to bring people together who might not have come together otherwise.

BS: I think Naomi and Les have done a wonderful job of letting the fingerprint of this community show. The feel of the play is local and urban, but mystical enough to relate to the human experience anywhere. I’m looking forward to creating music and sound to complement this fictional tale drawn from the non-fiction of real people’s lives.

—Compiled by Hannah Rae Montgomery
In At the Vanishing Point, the characters tell stories based in the Butchertown neighborhood of Louisville, Kentucky. Through the course of the play, we realize that all the characters are connected in some way, even if their stories do not directly interrelate. Write a story about your neighborhood. Who are the characters? What other stories might stem from this story?

Playwright Naomi Iizuka did extensive interviews with residents of the Butchertown neighborhood before writing At the Vanishing Point. Though the characters are fictionalized, the play uses real place names and references the history of Butchertown. How do you think basing the play in a specific neighborhood will impact the audience’s response to the play? What are the benefits and complications of setting a play in such a specific place?

Write a review of the performance of At the Vanishing Point that you saw at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Which parts of the play (the actors’ performances, the set, props, costumes, lighting and sound design, etc.) were most effective? Which parts were least effective? Back up your claims with evidence and details from your experience of watching the performance.

Actors Theatre of Louisville
c/o Jane B. Jones
316 West Main Street
Louisville, Kentucky 40202

The monologues in At the Vanishing Point are inspired by real people’s experiences in the Butchertown neighborhood. Interview a classmate about their neighborhood. Take the most engaging part of that story and craft a brief fictional monologue around it. Share the new story with your classmate.

In At the Vanishing Point, several businesses that don’t exist anymore are mentioned, but they are identifiable because of the lasting impact they had on the Butchertown area. Is there a business in your neighborhood that is so important that it will still have an impact on the community even after it closes? Write about how the business affects your neighborhood and why it will be remembered.

In writing At the Vanishing Point, Naomi Iizuka was inspired by Kentucky photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard’s unconventional family photography. Many of his photographs incorporate bizarre Halloween masks or decrepit buildings. Have the students look up some of Meatyard’s photographs and stage them with their own friends or family. Discuss what elements of the photographs were of most interest to them. How challenging was it recreate these pictures? How do the students’ photographs differ from the originals?

One of the intriguing elements of At the Vanishing Point is the slow revelation of how all the stories are connected. Divide the class into three or four large groups. Have each group write a series of short interrelated monologues that give clues as to how all the characters relate and perform them for the class. See if the other students can figure out how the characters are connected without additional clues from the presenting group.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW

1. *At the Vanishing Point* is described as “a mix of memory and myth bringing together ghosts of the past and snapshots of the present.” Within the play characters see uncanny things by an area called “the Point.” Pete Henzel sees “free-floating energy in the atmosphere like an electric current or a sound wave.” Martin Kinflein sees a girl who “looked just like a girl I used to know. Except it didn’t make sense because the girl I knew, she’d been dead for years.” Why do you think Naomi Iizuka would incorporate the idea of a place where reality meets the fantastical in her script? What thematic links can be created by including mystical elements?

2. *At the Vanishing Point* provides a picture of a community over time, told through a series of monologues; it does not follow a traditional structure with a central protagonist battling against an antagonist. How do you think its non-linear structure – a series of monologues from characters in different periods of time, but in the same neighborhood – will influence your understanding of the themes of the play? Why do you think the playwright would choose this structure?

POST-SHOW

1. Ben Sollee composed and performed original music for this production. How did seeing a live musician impact your experience of the play? How would the play have been different if they had used pre-recorded music?

2. *At the Vanishing Point* is a series of monologues, but the actors aren’t always alone onstage. How did seeing other non-speaking characters onstage impact your understanding of the speaking character’s monologue? Were there any particularly engaging stage pictures that resonated with you?

A view of Butchertown’s Beargrass Creek in the 1930s, surrounded by fields and farmlands. Photo courtesy of Metropolitan Sewer Collection, 1981.03, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville.