

theatre:
CALGARY

Stafford Arima, Artistic Director

PLAY GUIDE

THEATRE CALGARY PRESENTS
THE PUNCTUATE! THEATRE PRODUCTION OF

FIRST MÉTIS MAN OF ODESA



MATTHEW MACKENZIE, MARIYA KHOMUTOVA
PHOTO: EMILY COOPER

FIRST MÉTIS MAN OF ODESA

BY MATTHEW MACKENZIE AND MARIYA KHOMUTOVA
FEATURING MATTHEW MACKENZIE AND MARIYA KHOMUTOVA

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome educators!

Theatre Calgary's 2026–2027 Play Guides are designed to help you and your students get the most out of your experience at Theatre Calgary this season. You should feel free to use some or all of these materials included to provide context for your students before, during, and after their visit to Theatre Calgary. While students don't need this content to fully enjoy the production, connecting art to personal life deepens understanding and appreciation and supports social-emotional growth.

Each play guide offers you and your students a range of contextual material that may include background information on the play and playwright; social, linguistic, and historical context for the play; expectations for the theatre; a range of activities for the classroom (complete with materials!); and questions to guide discussions. You'll find activities that connect to current events, are interdisciplinary, can be tied into your curriculum, and meet you where you have capacity right now.

Pages marked with a ★ are student-ready and may be photocopied and shared with students to help them prepare independently.

We hope that you and your students enjoy your experience at Theatre Calgary this year!

With gratitude and admiration,



Aliza Sarian
Play Guide Developer
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ABOUT THE PLAY

SYNOPSIS.

This is the true love story of Matthew, a Métis man from Alberta, and Masha (short for Mariya), a performer living in Kyiv, Ukraine. This play is not told in chronological order, but rather, the narrators bring the audience into the telling across various points of their lives.

We follow their relationship as it grows from a chance meeting at a theatre in Kyiv to a long-distance romance and, ultimately, a marriage and family. Matthew and Mariya communicate through text messages, travelling back and forth between Canada and Ukraine. Their cultures become a defining part of their relationship, while humour helps them navigate the challenges of being together while living far apart.

The COVID-19 pandemic changes everything—borders close, travel becomes virtually impossible—and the couple is separated just when Mariya discovers that she is pregnant. Matthew travels to Ukraine to marry Mariya and find a way for her to return to Canada to have their baby, Ivan.

It's 2022, and Mariya is now living in Canada. As life begins to settle for the young family, Russia launches its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Mariya watches from afar while her family, friends, and home are in danger. The war affects her deeply, and Matthew struggles to understand how to support her. The couple must deal not only with this fear and uncertainty, but also with the question of how they can continue living their everyday lives while people Mariya loves are suffering.

The play also tells the story of how this real-life experience became a piece of theatre. As a playwright, Matthew wants to create a play about what he and Mariya have experienced, but she questions the ethics of turning these painful events into art. In the end, this piece explores the conflict between the two artists and the question of what happens when real people's lives become the material for a story.

WRITING A THEATRE REVIEW

A **theatre review** is an informed opinion supported by thoughtful analysis of its story and production elements that helps audiences decide whether a production is worth seeing.

[SAMPLE REVIEW A](#) | [SAMPLE REVIEW B](#)

TOP TIPS FOR CRITIQUING A PLAY

- Analyze the production beyond like/dislike
- Describe the production's value and/or appeal despite your personal response
- Support your views with examples & offer evidence to support your opinions
- Acknowledge audience reaction, even if it's different than yours & consider why

THEATRE REVIEW STRUCTURE

1. **Introduction.** What is the play, and who is the playwright? Where is it happening?
2. **Details.** What is unique about this production? Who is involved?
3. **Execution.** How do the parts of the show come together to tell the story?
4. **Critique.** What was successful? What didn't work? What stands out (lighting, sound, set, costuming, vision, acting)?
5. **Recommendation.** Why would you suggest others see this or not?

[CLICK HERE FOR A PLANNING TEMPLATE](#)

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN.



After meeting on a theatre research trip in Kyiv, Canadian Playwright Matthew Mackenzie and Ukrainian actor Mariya Khumutova spark up a romance, which takes them from the beaches of the Black Sea to the riverbanks of the North Saskatchewan River, through the onset of a global pandemic and the eruption of a brutal war, plus many moments of joy throughout, including marriage and the birth of their son.



MATTHEW MACKENZIE. Writer & Performer.

A citizen of the Métis Nation of Alberta and proud father of Ivan (Eevan, Vanya, Vanichka). Artistic Director of Punctuate! Theatre, Matthew is also the founder and an Artistic Associate with Pyretic Productions, a founding member of the Pemmican Collective, as well as Canadian Liaison of the Liberian Dance Troupe. Matt's plays include *Bears*, *After the Fire*, and *The Particulars*.



MARIYA (MASHA) KHOMUTOVA. Writer & Performer.

Started her theatre studies in Odesa at the age of 12. She graduated from the Kyiv National Theatre University in 2012 and worked in two repertoire theatres in Kyiv. Some of the favourite roles she has played are Agafya Tikhonovna (*The Marriage* by N.Gogol), Grushenka (*The Karamasov Brothers* by F. Dostoyevsky), Dunyasha (*Cherry Orchard* by A. Chekhov), Irodiada (*Salome* by O.Wilde). In 2020, Mariya was the recipient of a Golden Duke Award from the Odesa Film Festival for Best Actress in *Two of Us* (dir. Vladislav Vitriv).



HISTORICAL + SOCIAL CONTEXT.



5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THE MÉTIS NATION

- 1** The Métis are one of three **constitutionally recognized Indigenous peoples** in Canada, alongside First Nations and Inuit.
- 2** European **fur traders entered into marriages and other relationships with Indigenous women**, and their descendants developed a distinct Métis people and culture.
- 3** **Michif, the language of the Métis people**, was developed in the early 1800s, reflecting regional histories and draws on French, Cree, and other linguistic influences.
- 4** From 1885 to 1924, the same government system that gave Métis people certificates they could exchange for land or money, contributed to **families losing their land and being forced to move**.
- 5** The **Métis sash** is a colourful, finger-woven belt once used by fur traders and Métis people for practical purposes and is a symbol of Métis culture and heritage.



Source: [Metis National Council](https://www.metisnationalcouncil.ca/)

WHY DID RUSSIA INVADE UKRAINE IN 2022?

Ukraine is an independent Eastern European country fighting to defend its territory and determine its own future. It shares a long history with Russia, becoming independent in 1991 (with the fall of the Soviet Union), and strengthening its ties with the European Union and NATO since then.

Russian President Vladimir Putin sees this as a threat to Russia's influence and security. In 2014, Russia took control of Crimea, a region of Ukraine, and supported armed groups fighting the Ukrainian government. And on February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, attacking from several directions. Since then, Ukraine has been fighting back.

Like many wars, this is about land, power, national identity, and Ukraine's right to control its future. Millions of Ukrainians have been forced from their homes, and countries including Canada have provided support to Ukraine.

HOW HAS CANADA HELPED UKRAINIANS DISPLACED BY THE WAR?

- Created special immigration measures to help Ukrainians and their families find safety in Canada
- Provided temporary financial and housing support to help cover basic needs
- Made it easier for Ukrainians to get work and study permits
- Provided settlement support to help newcomers build lives in Canada
- Created pathways to reunite Ukrainians with family in Canada

LEARN MORE WITH YA LIT



In war-torn Kyiv, this coming-of-age tale becomes a quest story as two boys try to find their way home.



Follow a Métis teen as she time travels to connect her identity, history, and culture to her ancestors and community.



Real-life diary entries reveal a young Ukrainian's fear, daily life, and resilience amidst Russia's invasion.



A Métis girl confronts family secrets, identity, and belonging as she uncovers truths about her Indigenous heritage and adoption.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE THEATRE



An open mind.

Let the performance surprise you! Stay open to what can happen. Look for moments of theatrical magic (how did they change that costume so quickly?) and unexpected dialogue.

Assigned seats.

Every seat in the theatre offers a unique perspective on the action. Appreciate what you can see from your seat that someone else might not.

Live actors.

The performers on stage can see you, hear you, and feel your energy. And actors love student audiences! Laugh when something is funny! Gasp when you're surprised! Applaud when you're impressed! The actors thrive on audience reactions.

A break from reality.

Theatre-makers ask the audience to “suspend their disbelief.” If someone on stage says the red ribbon is blood, then it is! If an actor takes flight, then imagine you can't see the strings. This is what the actors ask of the audience. Embrace the magic of theatre.

Questions.

Listen carefully to the story being told. If you have a question, keep your voice to a whisper so it doesn't disturb others. (See the call out on Q + As to help you form great questions for the team behind the show.) Let yourself be challenged by the content. What new ideas or perspectives are you hearing?

Disconnection.

Put your phone away and immerse yourself in the technology of the theatre. The sounds and lights from your device are distracting to the actors, fellow audience members, and you! Plus, the law says that photos and videos aren't allowed, anyway.

PREPARING Q'S FOR Q + A

While you watch the show, consider how the creative team (see pg. 7) brings the story to life on stage for you.

Consider questions about the process:

- How did the lighting / set / costume / sound designer...
- What made the director choose to...
- How did the playwright decide to...

Ask questions about the story:

- Why did [character] make the decision to...
- Can you explain how...
- Why didn't _____ happen?

Learn more about each job:

- Why did you decide to become a...
- What do I need to do to become a...
- What has been your favourite...



THEATRE TEAM TALKBACK

Theatre is a 'team sport,' and it's not the actors alone who bring a production to life. After your show, you'll have a chance to ask questions of the creative team. Here are some of the folks you might expect to speak with:

The Playwright writes the script, sometimes from an original idea, and sometimes adapted from a book or story—decides what the characters say and, often, gives the designers guidelines on how the play should look.

The Director creates the vision for the production, how it will look on stage, and works closely with the actors, costume, set, and lighting designers to make sure everyone tells the same story.

The Actors use their bodies and voices to bring the playwright's words and the director's ideas to life on the stage.

The Designers imagine and create the lights, scenery, props, costumes, and sound that will compliment and tell the playwright's story in a way that matches the director's vision.

The Stage Manager assists the director during rehearsals by taking detailed notes and making sure the actors and designers understand these ideas. They run the show during each performance by making sure the actors' entrances and exits and the lights and sound all run smoothly.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

IF YOU HAVE 15 MINUTES...

Scarf Poetry

Poetry is a recurring motif in Masha and Matthew's story. This activity invites students to create their own poetry inspired by the cultural significance of an oversized square floral scarf worn by Indigenous women and Ukrainian grandmothers alike.

Focus Question. What inspiration can we draw from a source material around a scarf?

Objective. Students will be able to craft a poem inspired by the Kokum-Babushka scarf.

Procedure.

A NOTE ON MATERIALS. While images of Kokum-Babushka scarves are provided in [the slides](#), having a physical scarf is ideal to best capture a full sensory response, including texture, movement, and sound.

- 1 Ensure every student has something to write with and on.
- 2 Show the [video](#) twice.
 1. Just watch and listen.
 2. Listen and write 10 words that form an image in their mind or inspire them.
- 3 Share the scarf you've provided or the images on the [slides](#). Guide students to write down 10 words that reflect:
 - how these scarves look
 - how they move
 - how they feel
 - what they sound like
- 4 Have students rearrange the 20 words on their page to form a poem about the Kokum-Babushka scarf.

IF TIME... Students can share their poems aloud with a partner, at their tables, or for the class.

EXTENDED RESOURCES ON INDIGENOUS-UKRAINIAN RELATIONS IN ALBERTA

Linked below are several additional resources on the rich exploration of Ukrainian settlement on the lands of the Indigenous people of Alberta to enhance your classroom discussions or activities:

- *Kohkum's Babushka: A Magical Métis/Ukrainian Tale* by Marion Matala | a picture book on cultural exchange
- *Rethreading Relations: The Kokum Scarf as a Call to Action for Building Good Relations* by Avery Shtykalo and Gabrielle Legault | an academic paper on the history and future of this intercultural scarf
- *Scarves of the Matriarchs* by Kalle Benallie, *Indian Country Today* or *What Is a Kokum Scarf? The Floral Scarf That Honours Indigenous Grandmothers* from *Old Tribes Journal* | articles tracing the history of the Kokum scarf
- *The Indigenous-Ukrainian Relationship Initiative* | a cross-cultural organization that conducts research, fosters storytelling, and holds academic gatherings

IF YOU HAVE 30 MINUTES...

Cross-Cultural Pairings

A central theme of First Métis Man of Odesa is how physical and cultural borders cannot stop people from finding connections with one another. This activity starts by sharing an excerpt from a dance piece that explores such commonalities and concludes with students finding points of connection with one another.

Focus Question. How can listening to one another lead us to find similarities?

Objective. Students will be able to ask questions to uncover points of connection with a partner.

Procedure.

- 1 Start by sharing [the context provided](#) for the Shumka Ukrainian Dancers collaborative production of *Ancestors and Elders* to illustrate how much overlap exists between two seemingly divergent cultures.
- 2 Watch the excerpt from the performance (from 1:19 to 6:10).
- 3 Pair students (at random or in advance—you know your students and what might encourage productive conversation) and have them reflect briefly on the excerpt.
 - How did the choreography highlight points of connection?
 - Was there anything familiar to your own traditions?
- 4 With their partner, they should take turns asking open-ended questions ([examples provided on the slides](#)) to uncover similar traditions, language, foods, or values shared between their cultures.
- 5 Come together as a whole group to share unexpected discoveries they made during the activity.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR *ANCESTORS AND ELDERS*

[Ancestors and Elders Study Guide](#)

[Context from Shumka Ukrainian Dancers](#)

[Complete TELUS video of *Ancestors and Elders*](#)

IF YOU HAVE AN HOUR...

Humour in Hard Times

A unique and delightful element of First Métis Man of Odesa is how Matthew and Mariya address some very traumatic events—the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, mandated government separation—through humour and levity. Even the content warnings for the show highlight the power of laughter to process difficult emotions. This activity encourages students to find ways to balance challenges with not taking oneself too seriously.

Focus Question. How can we find moments of lightness among serious challenges?

Objective. Students will be able to identify opportunities for humour in a content warning.

Procedure.

- 1 Prompt a discussion with the class:
 - Why do plays, movies, and TV shows offer viewers a content warning?
 - How does a content warning affect the audience's experience of the material?
- 2 Share [Punctuate Theatre's content warning](#) for *First Métis Man of Odesa* and discuss how this might influence their experience of the play
- 3 For this activity, students will be creating their own content warning. To help them imagine the possibilities for theirs, co-create one for your classroom together. For example:

Entering this classroom may cause:

 - You to rethink how you feel about nonfiction
 - Stage fright
 - The development of lifelong friendships
- 4 Using this content warning as a model, have students choose one of the following for which to create their own content warning:
 - Our school (*hallway, gymnasium, parking lot, etc.*)
 - A public event you recently attended (*sports match, family reunion, etc.*)
 - A space where you spend a lot of time (*your bedroom, your grandmother's kitchen, soccer practice, etc.*)
 - A familiar book, movie, television show, or video game
- 5 Invite students to share with one another or the whole class

FEEL FREE TO USE THESE
[LESSON SLIDES](#)

EXTENSION. If time allows, students can create a visual poster or sign to be displayed.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

A theatrical experience is not complete without reflection. What is the audience talking about when they leave the theatre? Here are some questions to pose to your students following their experience with *First Métis Man of Odesa* at Theatre Calgary.

- 1 How did Matthew and Mariya achieve the creation of a joyful and funny play while dealing with difficult events? Reflect on how the music, set, selected moments of their story, and their onstage interactions with one another might have contributed.
- 2 What theatrical elements (lighting, sound, costumes, staging, etc.) did you find most effective or compelling in telling this story?
- 3 Like many people, Masha is able to put aside the turmoil in her country until it directly relates to her. Why do you think people do this? When have you set aside a significant event or issue? How did it feel to do that at the time? And now?
- 4 How do the differences between Matthew and Masha's families strengthen or challenge their relationship? Have you experienced a similar dynamic in any of your relationships?
- 5 If you were to dramatize a significant event in your life, what would you choose? What makes it a compelling story? How might you find humour in that moment?

THEATRE CALGARY PLAY GUIDES DEVELOPED BY

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