

State of The Union

By Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse

September 16 - October 12, 2008

Quadracci Powerhouse Theater



☆ A study guide for students and educators ☆

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Researched and designed by the Education Department at the Milwaukee Repertory Theater and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of and appreciation for the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of

STATE OF THE UNION

If you would like to schedule a classroom workshop, or if we can help in any other way, please contact:

Jenny Kostreva at (414) 290-5370
jkostreva@milwaukeeep.com

Rebecca Witt at (414) 290-5393
rwitt@milwaukeeep.com

Study Guide
created by
Rebecca Witt,
Education Coordinator

With contributions
from Kristin Crouch,
Literary Director

Edited by
Jenny Kostreva,
Education Director

Kristin Crouch,
Literary Director

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Warning *State of the Union* contains mild profanity.

The Rep
MILWAUKEE ♦

★ SYNOPSIS ★

Act I, Scene 1

STATE OF THE UNION opens during a meeting in the Washington, D.C. home of Jim Conover, a politician who is searching for a Republican presidential candidate popular enough to win the 1948 election. Kay Thorndike, a newspaper publisher, and Spike McManus, a reporter, think that Grant Matthews is the right candidate. Grant, a wealthy, self-made businessman who has become very popular for his speeches, is reluctant about the idea of being a presidential candidate, but Kay and Spike encourage Jim to consider him. They all agree that the best way to figure out if Grant is the right man is to follow him on a speaking tour that he is doing at his various airplane manufacturing plants around the country. Unfortunately, word of Grant's affair with Kay has started spreading, so Jim suggests that Grant invite his wife along for the tour, to make a public statement about the stability of Grant's marriage.

Act I, Scene 2

"The American people are facing problems today that will affect the future of the entire world."

Grant

The next night, Jim encourages Grant to tone down his speeches. Grant works with Spike to change his remarks. Mary arrives, and, due to the lack of space in the house, she agrees to stay in the same room as Grant. While Grant is downstairs meeting some politically influential people, Jim lets Mary know that Grant is thinking about becoming a presidential candidate. Mary correctly guesses that she has been invited along on the speaking tour to quell rumors about Grant and Kay. Mary also recognizes right away that, although Grant says he wants to be an honest politician and not play any games, Grant is being manipulated by Jim and the others. When the maid brings a pair of Kay's glasses to Grant's room and asks him where they should be sent, Mary realizes that Grant has seen Kay recently, and it changes her mood. In a huff, she creates a makeshift bed on the floor and forces Grant to sleep there while she takes the bed.

Act II

Several weeks later, Grant and Mary arrive at a hotel in Detroit to make his final speech at a banquet, both excited about the response that Grant has been getting from his other presentations. Jim and Spike, however, are not thrilled. While the speeches have excited the general population, the special interest groups and other political entities that sway the course of an election are not happy with Grant's statements. Before the speech, in the Matthews' hotel suite, Spike lines up several quick meetings for Grant with various special interest groups. In between meetings, Jim, worried about the content of Grant's Detroit speech, tries to get Grant to take out some of the more radical statements, but Grant refuses. While Grant is out of the room, Jim tries to coerce Mary to get Grant to change his speech, but this fails, too. Jim and Spike are also dismayed to find out that, without their knowledge, Grant has set up a meeting with the foreign policy association, a politically important meeting that will cause Grant to announce his candidacy—an announcement that Jim and Spike have been trying to postpone. Jim tries one last time, suggesting that Grant not alienate his Detroit audience, which is a good source of illegally filtered campaign contributions. Mary is dismayed to hear that Grant thinks it is okay to take silent money, as long as it goes to Jim, and not directly to him. In the middle of their discussion, Spike enters and announces that Grant has one more delegation to see. After Grant's return to the room, everyone, but Jim, leaves together to attend Grant's speech. Kay enters, revealing that she was the last, unnamed "delegation" who met with Grant. She talks with Jim, telling him that all is well and that she set Grant's mind straight about the things he needed to say in his Detroit speech.

Act III, Scene 1

It is two weeks later. Mary and Grant host a party attended by several prominent Republican supporters and politicians, including Kay, at their apartment. Mary is upset that Grant changed his speech in Detroit at the last minute, but she agrees to be civil for the night. Mary has even agreed not to drink, because she does not want to slip up and spoil Grant's night. But when the guests start arriving, things start to unravel. Mary realizes that Kay is the one who met with Grant right before his speech and persuaded him to alter it. Mary's mood immediately changes. She starts drinking and interjects catty comments into the political conversation and continues drinking until just before dinner, becoming very drunk.

"Everybody here tonight was thinking about the next election. Well, it's time somebody began thinking of the next generation."

Mary

Act III, Scene 2

An hour later, Mary sits in the living room with Lulubelle, the wife of one of the guests. As the two women talk, it is revealed that Mary made a scene during dinner and that she cannot remember all of the ways she insulted her guests. Jim enters and tries to convince Mary that if she does not help persuade Grant that he needs to cater to the special interest groups in order to get votes, then he will not get elected. Furthermore, he tells her that the White House is the only place that Mary and Grant can hope to remain married, because otherwise, Grant will probably leave Mary for Kay, something Grant could not do if he was in the public eye. As the party breaks up and guests start to leave, they all try to manipulate Grant in different ways and talk about the political ploys they will need to use to win certain votes. At Jim's urging, Mary tries to go along with this, but she can only take so much. Mary finally explodes, sober this time, saying that they are trying to take away everything that is good about Grant and that nobody is looking out for the next generation. Her comments affect Grant, and he tells Jim, Spike and Kay that he is not going to be a presidential candidate anymore. They all leave, and when Grant and Mary are alone, he suggests that they take a trip back to the place where they honeymooned, a good sign that their marriage is going in a positive direction.

★ ABOUT THE AUTHORS ★

Coming from an underprivileged family, Howard Lindsay was born March 29, 1889 as Herman Nelke and the youngest of four. His father died when he was young, leaving the four children, his mother, and his grandmother to fend for themselves. The family moved to Atlantic City and Lindsay started his first job at the age of five as a paper boy. He attended a Latin boarding school when he was young and graduated from high school. Lindsay was granted a scholarship to Harvard, despite his lack of social and economical stature, but only stayed there for a year because of his lack of funding for basic needs.

After leaving Harvard, Lindsay obtained his first acting gig for a touring show: Margaret Mayo's *Polly of the Circus*. Here, he was thrown into the theater world acting in numerous one night stands and completing other small tasks in order to keep the production on its feet. From 1913 to 1918, Lindsay worked for Margaret Anglin's Company in Los Angeles. During these five years Lindsay played several bit parts, but primarily was a stage manager for Anglin. His love of theater shined as he coached actors, produced shows, and started writing. Eventually, Lindsay moved to New York to do more stage managing. There, in 1924, he met Dorothy Stickney, his future wife, at a business meeting. While nothing happened at first, Dorothy called Lindsay for advice and consolation on her deteriorating acting career. After this meeting the two of them became very close and in 1927, married. Their marriage was full of love and happiness and they moved to New Jersey in 1932 to live on a small farm to get away from bustling New York City. But, the distance didn't keep Lindsay from the New York theaters.

1933 marks the year that Lindsay was officially recognized as a playwright. His play, *SHE LOVES ME NOT*, was an absolute success. Running for 248 nights to packed houses, Lindsay received raving reviews as a dramatist. From here, he continued to write and eventually met Russel Crouse in 1934.

Russel McKinley Crouse was born February 20, 1893, the middle child of three. His family was very loving and they lived comfortably. Crouse's father was a journalist and allowed Crouse to follow him to work in the afternoons at the *News-Bee* plant in Toledo. His love of writing grew and at the age of eleven Crouse started his own paper, the *Herald*. In 1907, the Crouse family moved to Enid, Oklahoma and at the age of fourteen, Crouse and a friend started a magazine entitled *The Quill*. It was a great success both with students at their school as well as with the community.

After graduating from high school, Crouse attempted to go to college. He applied to the United States Naval Academy, but failed his entrance exams. With very little money, Crouse went to Cincinnati to visit his uncle, who worked for the *Cincinnati Post*. At the age of sixteen, Crouse got a job with the *Post* doing various news stories. Crouse was very successful at this and two years later, tried going back to college at the Western Reserve University. He was unable to attend, again, because he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. By the time he was healthy, the fall term had already started. Crouse went back to his family who were living in Kansas City and started working for the *Kansas City Star*. He did various jobs before getting a more permanent job working for the sports editor. During this time, Crouse went to many theatrical performances and started to become very interested in theater. He worked at the *Star* for seven years and then decided to go to New York to try his hand in the big city.

Crouse was able to get a job at *The Globe* where he worked for many years. He met his first wife, Alison Smith and married in 1923, only to divorce in 1929. While working at *The Globe*, Crouse also worked for other various papers and magazines, getting as much writing experience as possible. In 1931, a producer in New York recognized his hard work and love of theater and sent him to collaborate with Morrie Ryskind and Oscar Hammerstein II on *THE GANG'S ALL HERE*. This is the first show that Crouse worked on that recognized him as a playwright. Although the show flopped, only running for two weeks, Crouse loved it and decided to become a dramatist.

It was in 1934 when Lindsay and Crouse collaborated together for the first time. They had a mutual friend, Neysa McMein, which made the connection between the two. Lindsay was working with Cole Porter on the musical *ANYTHING GOES* when Porter needed help with writing the book. Lindsay didn't want to help out because he was already busy with directing the show. McMein called the producer, Vinton Freedley, who was also friends with McMein and told him that Russel Crouse was the answer. Freedley called Crouse and that started the long time collaboration of Lindsay and Crouse. Along with *Anything Goes*, they wrote multiple plays and librettos including *RED, HOT, AND BLUE*, *THE SOUND OF MUSIC*, *LIFE WITH FATHER*, and their Pulitzer Prize winner, *STATE OF THE UNION*. Lindsay died in 1968 and Crouse died in 1966 leaving us with comedies and dramas that blend Lindsay's theatrical knowledge and Crouse's sharp wit into wonderful works of art.



Lindsay and Crouse discuss one of their plays being produced.

☆ AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR MICHAEL HALBERSTAM ☆

Literary Director Kristin Crouch sat down with director Michael Halberstam to talk about the upcoming production of STATE OF THE UNION.



KRISTIN CROUCH: Michael, what excites you the most about working on this production?

MICHAEL HALBERSTAM: Firstly, and foremost I am excited and ignited by this cast. It is a luxury to work on a chestnut piece of writing from this time period and genre and even more so to have a play that is so absolutely relevant to the moment, but what makes doing this show in the Powerhouse special is the company. Milwaukee Repertory boasts one of the finest ensembles in the country and for a director to be in collaboration with artists of this caliber in every single role is truly an unparalleled opportunity. Furthermore, there is a scale to this play that can only be realized in environments such as exist in Milwaukee. We are very lucky to be exploring this play, in this place, at this time.

“This play finds its laughter in the wonderful balance between matters of great import and delicious human dysfunction and wraps it all up in a text filled with sparkingly delicious wit.”

KRISTIN: STATE OF THE UNION is set over fifty years ago, just after WWII, when the country was also dealing with domestic issues such as massive strikes in industry, rising pressures from special interest groups and a health care crisis. In this way, the play appears to be very relevant to our current generation—How do you think this play speaks to audiences today?

MICHAEL: Well I think you’ve just answered your own question even as you were asking it! Delicious how relevant it is, isn’t it? However, there is a *special* relevancy to the parallel between the prelude to a primary that STATE OF THE UNION describes and the rather grueling primary experience from which we have just emerged. I don’t know personally whether to be relieved that our current pressures are almost exactly the same as those described in the play or depressed. Fortunately, Lindsey and Crouse understand that humor is vital in keeping us all engaged.

KRISTIN: Where do you find the humor in this story?

MICHAEL: Groucho Marx was once asked the difference between an amateur and a professional comedian. He said something to the effect of “An amateur dresses someone up as an old lady, puts them in a wheelchair, takes them to the top of a staircase and pushes them down. With a professional? It’s a real old lady.” I suppose what I’m saying is that all good comedy emerges from darker circumstance. This play finds its laughter in the wonderful balance between matters of great import and delicious human dysfunction and wraps it all up in a text filled with sparkingly delicious wit.

KRISTIN: The political outsider and presidential hopeful, Grant Matthews, is passionate about trying to unify the nation. What do you hope audiences will take with them about the possibility of Grant’s vision for our future, here in the 21st century?

MICHAEL: A balance between the intangible and the visceral? Tempered by pragmatism? A desire to find a fresh perspective for our political process? I wish that we could move away from the media sensationalism of elections. We hold our candidates up to moral standards that we could never live up to ourselves. We force them to stay absolutely consistent to the same ideals that they launch their campaigns with when what we really want them to do is to learn, grow and change just like we do. In return for these unreachable and unrealistic standards, we get professional politicians who spend so much time trying to avoid being specific, taking a stance, or tackling any issue that might upset a significant demographic that we end up with a sort of second rate daytime soap opera being played out at our own expense. If we want politicians like Grant, we need to start focusing specifically on the root problems we face as a nation rather than hot button issues that make for good television. This play accurately predicts our current predicament and I think the conclusion of the play raises all the right questions.

KRISTIN: The title, *STATE OF THE UNION*, suggests the political focus of the play. It speaks to the issues involved with a presidential election process. Yet, it really is more of a love story, isn’t it? How do you plan to explore the romantic aspects of the script—the “state of the union” between Grant and his wife, Mary?

MICHAEL: I’ve always believed that politics is just a macro manifestation of personal interaction. In other words – ‘family’ on a national scale. Mary and Grant are estranged and as is soon revealed in the play (I’m not giving anything away) straying from their vows. Over the course of the play they challenge each other and are forced to confront difficult issues. They have very human responses to those challenges, some of them noble and some of them ignoble. At the conclusion of the play they are forced to ask whether or not they are willing to compromise love in order to preserve their union and must chose accordingly. These are very intimate and personal circumstances with very political overtones.

☆ RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING ☆

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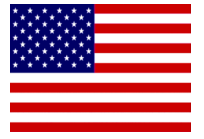
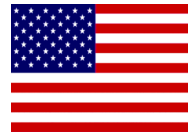
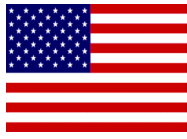
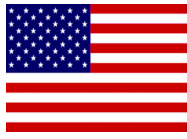
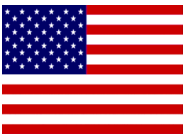
☆ HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PLAY ☆

Written by Kristin Crouch, Literary Director at The Rep

With the end of World War II, the United States had achieved a massive international victory, and twelve million weary American soldiers returned home as heroes. The G.I.'s were welcomed back amidst waves of celebration and rejoicing to what now appeared to be the greatest and most powerful nation in the world. But with the return to life as usual on the home front, the unity that had sustained the nation during the dark years of the battle against fascism now began to unravel. The use of the atomic bomb had brought an abrupt end to the war, and threw domestic life off balance for a nation that didn't yet have a post-war policy set in place.

The war effort had necessarily kept strict restrictions on cost and availability of goods that influenced all aspects of everyday life. The unions had agreed not to strike during the war, keeping prices relatively stable. Yet, the patriotic spirit of cooperation, so strong during the wartime years, suddenly faded as Americans desperately yearned to go on with their lives. In the months following the end of the war, business and labor interests collided. The nation was looking forward to a long-awaited peacetime prosperity and businessmen wanted to charge more for their goods. Prices soared, unions demanded higher wages in response, and one million workers walked off of their jobs at the same time. By 1946, 5000 strikes threatened to cripple the nation. In May of that same year, a national railway strike paralyzed the country. Prices immediately soared six percent, and a shortage of bread, meat, and housing angered the American citizens.

With the life of the country quickly being torn to shreds, President Truman was under pressure to find a solution. His unusual approach was to threaten to draft the striking railway workers. The plan worked and the strike ended, but the experience left deep and bitter feelings between labor and management. In fact, just about everyone seemed to be unhappy and they blamed the President for their problems. There was an election on the horizon, but who could offer a promise of hope for the future in a nation so divided by special interests, labor disputes, the aftermath of war, and shortages in the basic necessities of food, housing and medical care?



☆ THE STATE OF THE UNION ☆

Article Two, Section Three of the United States Constitution states that “[the president] shall from time to time give to the Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” The State of the Union is a speech the President gives to Congress every year in January. When the country was first founded, the speech was referred to as the Annual Message and used to be written, not spoken. The first State of the Union (referred to as such after 1945) was given in 1790 by George Washington. Most of these early speeches were laundry lists of bills the President wanted Congress to enact. They also included internal threats to the Union and the Union's place in the world. Over the years, the speech has changed and now it usually covers the administration's accomplishments from the past year as well as goals for the future year. The State of the Union usually has a positive connotation, even if it is given during turbulent times. Over the years it has become a custom to also include a phrase similar to, “The State of the Union is strong.” Since 1966, the speech has been followed by a rebuttal or response from a member from the opposite political party. While at first controversial, it is now widely accepted by the American people.

In the play, the physical state of the Union is on the edge. There is much political strife and politicians tread on rough times. Grant discusses this strife and how it is affecting the working man. He believes that honesty and integrity will strengthen the state of the Union. However, while Grant is trying to fix the state of the Union, he is neglecting his own union with his wife. The play not only focuses on the US after World War II, but also on the crumbling marriage between Grant and Mary. While Grant realizes his marriage is failing, he does nothing to try to improve it. Surprisingly enough, his ideas for improving the nation are also applicable to improving his marriage: be honest and heartfelt when discussing the issues at hand. It takes a disastrous dinner party for Grant to realize that he needs to stop trying to improve the state of the Union and start improving the state of his union.

★ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES ★

★ STATE OF THE UNION addresses several issues relating to business and economical situations in the United States. How have things changed since 1946? What do you think is the present state of the Union? If things haven't changed, what would you do to alter these issues? Write a letter to the state Governor or another politician sharing your ideas on how to better the situations you care about.

★ Grant, Mary, Jim, Kay, and Spike are all trying to get different things out of the election. What does each person hope to gain from Grant's decision to run for office? Do their goals change over the course of the play? How so?

★ At the end of the play, Grant ends up withdrawing from the presidential race, despite his great success. Do you think that he did the right thing? Why or why not? Re-write the end of the play, individually or with a group, so Grant does continue on with the campaign. What happens in this version?

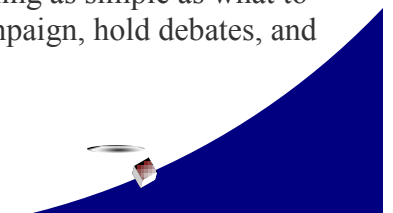
★ Article II, Section 1, Clause 5 of the U.S. Constitution has only three requirements for a president. (1) Must be at least 35 years old, (2) have lived in the United States at least 14 years, and (3) be a natural-born citizen. Do you think that these are good requirements? Do you think that the requirements should be more strict or lenient? Write down your thoughts and then have a discussion with your classmates.

★ If you were running in an election, how would you get people to vote for you? Write a speech addressing the various issues that are critical to your campaign. Perform the speech for your fellow classmates.

★ Several characters in the play tell small lies in order to gain attention or to help the political campaign, causing both positive and negative effects. Compare and contrast these effects and discuss whether telling fibs such as these is okay for the greater good.

★ The "State of the Union" addresses the health of the United States, the things we have accomplished as a nation, and the outlook for the future. Write a personal "State of You" speech containing things you have accomplished this past year and the outlook for your future.

★ A full election contains campaigning, debating, voting, and accepting the final outcome. As a class, come up with something to vote on, such as a new policy, electing someone, or something as simple as what to have for lunch, and hold a mini-election. Pick representatives for the idea(s), campaign, hold debates, and have a final voting time. Reflect on the entire process with your class.



The Milwaukee Repertory Theater
Department of Education

Jenny Kostreva, *Education Director*
jkostreva@milwaukeeep.com
(414) 290-5370

Rebecca Witt, *Education Coordinator*
rwitt@milwaukeeep.com
(414) 290-5393

*“The theatre is so endlessly fascinating
because it's so accidental.
It's so much like life.”*

Arthur Miller

Our lives are greatly enhanced with theater. Studying and viewing it teaches us about other cultures and times, collaboration, work ethic, and imagination. We become more aware of the world around us with these concepts, and in addition to this, more alert to and responsive of human nature. With this improved understanding of what theater can provide for us we are able to gain a better appreciation not only for theater, but for life as well.

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☆ **VISITING THE REP** ☆

The Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater, and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Powerhouse Theater lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains, and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) in the coat check room, and enjoy them outside the theater during intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full “running time” of the play.

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The Rep Milwaukee

THEATER ♦ TRAINING AT ITS BEST