

studio180theatre

STUDY GUIDE

FALL 2017

My Name is Asher Lev

by Aaron Posner, adapted from the novel by Chaim Potok

**co-produced by Studio 180 Theatre and HAROLD GREEN
JEWISH THEATRE COMPANY**

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A. Guidelines for Productive Classroom Discussion

Thank you for bringing your students to *My Name is Asher Lev*. We at Studio 180 Theatre and the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company hope your students have the most positive and engaging theatre experience possible. To that end, we have created this **Study Guide** to support your pre-show preparation and post-show follow-up in the classroom.

For the most robust exploration of the characters and themes of *My Name is Asher Lev*, we recommend booking a [Studio 180 IN CLASS](#) workshop led by our experienced Artist Educators. We use drama-based activities to promote empathy and inspire critical thinking in three immersive sessions, delving into the big questions of the play. Please contact [Jessica Greenberg](#) to learn more or book a workshop.

Studio 180 is known for provocative shows that tackle potentially sensitive, personal and controversial topics. While *My Name is Asher Lev* is an age-appropriate play for high school students of all ages, it contains some serious themes that may feel private or uncomfortable for some students, including issues of identity, family, religion and culture. With this in mind, Studio 180 has developed the following guidelines to help you lead productive pre- and post-show sessions in which **all students feel valued, respected and able to contribute openly and honestly to the discussion.**

- Class members should make a commitment to respecting one another. Invite suggestions from students as to what “**respect**” means to them. Some of these guidelines may include commitments to confidentiality, avoiding side chatter, and never ridiculing or putting down ideas.
- Your class may include students from a wide variety of cultural, racial, religious and national backgrounds. The main characters in *My Name is Asher Lev* are Jewish; there may or may not be Jewish students in your class, and it is important to note that Judaism includes a broad and diverse spectrum of religious observance and cultural practice. **Teachers and students must resist the urge to place individuals in the spotlight based on their perceived identity or point of view.** Students will engage in the conversation as they feel comfortable.
- Family diversity is important to keep in mind for both teachers and students to **avoid generalizations and assumptions** that could isolate or alienate individuals. Frequent reminders that there will often be as many different perspectives as there are people in the room are valuable and help reinforce the value of a multiplicity of ideas and points of view.
- It is the moderator’s role to establish a space of respect and inclusion, and they must take special care to **ensure that students holding a majority opinion do not vilify those “on the other side” who hold a minority view.** The moderator should also pose questions to the class to help keep the conversation on track.
- The point of a classroom discussion about *My Name is Asher Lev* should not be to reach a class consensus. The goal should be to **establish a forum for a free and respectful exchange of ideas.**

B. Feedback

1. Teacher Response Form

Studio 180 is grateful for your feedback and strives to incorporate your suggestions into our educational programming. Kindly complete this form and return it by mail to **Studio 180 Theatre, 19 Madison Ave, Third Floor, Toronto, ON, M5R 2S2**. We welcome student feedback as well, so please do not hesitate to send us student reviews, reports, projects and other responses. If you prefer to respond electronically, we offer a single teacher/student feedback form that can be completed here: <http://studio180theatre.com/education/feedback/education-feedback-form/>.

- 1. How did you find out about *My Name is Asher Lev*?**

- 2. Did you find the Study Guide useful in preparing your class for the play and/or in helping to shape post-show class discussion?**

- 3. Did you find the post-show Q&A session productive and interesting?**

- 4. Did the themes and issues of the play inform or enhance your course curriculum? Were you able to use the experience at the theatre as a springboard to class work and if so, how?**

C. Introduction to Studio 180 Theatre

Inspired by the belief that people can engage more fully in the world through the experience of live performance, Studio 180 Theatre produces socially relevant theatre that provokes public discourse and promotes community engagement.

Our inaugural production of *The Laramie Project* played to sold-out houses at Artword Theatre in Toronto in 2003. Its success led to a 2004 remount at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, which earned two Dora Award nominations. Since then, Studio 180 has continued to stage acclaimed productions of plays that tackle difficult issues and generate powerful audience and community responses. These are often Toronto, Canadian and/or North American premieres of large ensemble pieces that are contemporary, internationally renowned, and unlikely to be produced elsewhere.

As an independent theatre company, we are a nomadic group of artists. We create and produce our work in various spaces and venues across Toronto and we frequently partner with other companies in order to stage our plays. Past partnerships have included collaborations with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Canadian Stage, Acting Up Stage, The Theatre Centre, Tarragon Theatre and Mirvish Productions. We are proud to be partnering with the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company for the first time for *My Name is Asher Lev*.

In addition to our producing partners, we have a proud history of collaborating with community and advocacy organizations to raise funds and awareness around issues, causes and communities. Through special events, art exhibits in our theatre lobbies, pre- and post-show conversations, and panel discussions, we work together with artists, community leaders and subject matter experts to bring conversations ignited by our plays [Beyond the Stage](#). Community partners have included Supporting Our Youth, The Triangle Program, Givat Haviva, Palestine House, Democrats Abroad, The 519, AIDS ACTION NOW!, AIDS Committee of Toronto, Toronto People With AIDS Foundation, Positive Youth Outreach, Peace Now, The Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation of Canada, Women in Capital Markets, Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention, CATIE, Alliance for South Asian AIDS Prevention, the Cities Centre at U of T, Feminist Art Conference, Shameless Magazine and the Dotsa Bitove Wellness Academy.

Outreach to high school audiences has always been a crucial component of our work. In 2009 we launched [Studio 180 IN CLASS](#), an innovative workshop model that fosters productive dialogue, encourages critical thinking, and promotes empathy by exploring the uniquely humanizing capacity of live theatre. Over the years, our Studio 180 IN CLASS program has grown to reach hundreds of high school students across the GTA each year.

We love plays that provoke big questions about our communities and our world; we have introduced Toronto audiences to a significant number of socially relevant plays from international stages. In 2015, inspired by our eagerness to investigate more locally-rooted questions, we launched [Studio 180 IN DEVELOPMENT](#), one of Toronto's newest theatre creation initiatives. Working with both established and emerging playwrights and creators, we provide financial and artistic resources to a broad range of issue-based works at various stages of development. We then invite student and public audiences to hear the work and contribute to the development process.

2017/18 marks Studio 180 Theatre's 15th Anniversary Season. In addition to *My Name is Asher Lev*, we will once again be part of the Off-Mirvish season with the Toronto premiere of Mike Bartlett's future history play [King Charles III](#), running at the Panasonic Theatre in February and March 2018. In addition to our mainstage productions, we will be developing a number of new works during two instalments of our Studio 180 IN DEVELOPMENT program, in October and April.

Studio 180 Theatre's Production History

- 2003** *The Laramie Project*, Artword Theatre
- 2004** *The Laramie Project*, at and in association with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre
The Passion of the Chris, Toronto Fringe Festival
- 2006** *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook*, Berkeley Street Theatre Upstairs
- 2007** *Offensive Shadows*, SummerWorks Festival
- 2008** *Stuff Happens*, Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs
- 2008/09** *Offensive Shadows*, Tarragon Theatre Extra Space
Blackbird, Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs, in association with Canadian Stage
- 2009/10** *Stuff Happens*, Royal Alexandra Theatre, presented by David Mirvish
The Overwhelming, Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs, in association with Canadian Stage
- 2010/11** *Parade*, Berkeley Street Theatre Upstairs, in association with Acting Up Stage
Our Class, Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs, in association with Canadian Stage
- 2011/12** *The Normal Heart*, at and in association with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre
Clybourne Park, Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs, in association with Canadian Stage
- 2012/13** *The Normal Heart*, at and in association with Buddies in Bad Times Theatre
Clybourne Park, Panasonic Theatre, presented by David Mirvish
The Laramie Project 10th Anniversary Reading (featuring 50-member ensemble), Panasonic Theatre
- 2013/14** *God of Carnage*, Panasonic Theatre, presented by David Mirvish
Cock, The Theatre Centre
- 2014/15** *NSFW*, The Theatre Centre
Love, Dishonor, Marry, Die, Cherish, Perish, Fleck Dance Theatre, co-presented with PANAMANIA presented by CIBC; in association with IFOA
- 2015/16** *You Will Remember Me*, at and in co-production with Tarragon Theatre
- 2016/17** *My Night With Reg*, Panasonic Theatre, presented by David Mirvish

D. Introduction to Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company

David Eisner and Avery Saltzman are the co- Artistic Directors of the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company, Toronto's only professional theatre company established to celebrate, illuminate and share the Jewish story.

These stories have been 5,000 years in the making; they have universal application. These stories have to be told and need to be seen.

It is our responsibility and privilege to share them with the world.

Harold Green Jewish Theatre's founding vision is to illuminate humanity through a Jewish perspective, by inviting artists and audiences to participate in live theatre, the meeting place of all the arts.

Now in its 11th season, the Harold Green Jewish Theatre has produced and presented over 40 shows. Some of the highlights are *An Evening with Joel Grey*, *Mamaloshen* starring Mandy Patinkin, *Walk Me to the Corner – An Evening with Brent Carver*, Tova Feldshuh in *Golda's Balcony*, *New Jerusalem*, *The Whipping Man*, *Sholom Aleichem* starring Theodore Bikel, *Tuesday's with Morrie* starring Hal Linden, and *The Jazz Singer* to name a few.

We welcome our diverse audiences as we would friends into our homes. In this electronic age of increasing social isolation, each performance brings together artists and audiences for a unique Jewish encounter.

Harold Green Jewish Theatre's Production History

- 2007/08** *Rose*, at the Jane Mallett Theatre
The Sisters Rosensweig, at the Jane Mallett Theatre
- 2008/09** *Kindertransport*, at the Al Green Theatre
Tuesdays with Morrie, at the Winter Garden Theatre
Zisele, as part of Luminato Festival, at the Jane Mallett Theatre
- 2009/10** *Sholom Aleichem: Laughter Through Tears*, at the Winter Garden Theatre
Talk, at the Jane Mallett Theatre
The Soul of Gershwin, at the Winter Garden Theatre
- 2010/11** *Zero Hour*, at the Al Green Theatre
To Life, at the Jane Mallett Theatre
One of a Kind, produced by the Nephesh Theatre at the Jane Mallett Theatre
Lenin's Embalmers, at the Al Green Theatre
- 2011/12** *Mamoloshen*, at the Bluma Appel Theatre
The Children's Republic, co-produced by Tarragon Theatre
Lost in Yonkers, at the Jane Mallett Theatre
Visiting Mr. Green, at the Jane Mallett Theatre
Circumcise Me! at the Jane Mallett Theatre
- 2012/13** *Over the Rainbow*, a one-night-only event at the George Weston Recital Hall
Falsettos, in association with Acting Up Stage Company
The Whipping Man, in association with Obsidian Theatre Company
Nazi Hunter, in the Studio Theatre at the Toronto Centre for the Arts
- 2013/14** *Funny Girl: In Concert*, a fundraiser at the George Weston Recital Hall
Like Irving Berlin, a one-night-only event at the Toronto Centre for the Arts
Stars of David, in association with Angel Walk Theatre
... And Stockings for the Ladies, produced by Rustwerk Refinery
New Jerusalem, in the Studio Theatre at the Toronto Centre for the Arts
Israeli Love Story, direct from Israel in the Studio Theatre
- 2014/15** *Therefore Choose Life*, at the Greenwin Theatre
Driving Miss Daisy, co-produced by Obsidian Theatre Company
Stephen Schwartz: From Godspell to Wicked, a fundraising event
Fabrik: The Legend of M. Rabinowitz, in association with Sara Schwartz Geller
Joel Grey: Up Close and Personal, at the George Weston Recital Hall
Bella – The Colour of Love, in the Studio Theatre
- 2015/16** *The Immigrant*, at the Greenwin Theatre
The Model Apartment, at the Greenwin Theatre
Golda's Balcony, starring Tovah Feldshuh at the Greenwin Theatre
Kabaret, at the Greenwin Theatre
A Rhapsody in Gershwin, a one-night-only event in the Recital Hall
25 Questions for a Jewish Mother, at the Greenwin Theatre
- 2016/17** *Rose*, at the Greenwin Theatre
Walk Me to the Corner: An Evening with Brent Carver at the Greenwin Theatre
Freud's Last Session, at the Greenwin Theatre
The Jazz Singer, co-produced with Dancap Productions at the Greenwin Theatre
A Boy Like That: An Evening of Leonard Bernstein, in the Recital Hall

E. Introduction to the Play and the Writers

The Play – My Name is Asher Lev

“When I was young, I would often look at myself in the mirror for a long time. Not for vanity. But because I was so curious about the person on the other side.”

– Asher Lev

Asher Lev is a young Jewish artist, torn between his Hasidic upbringing and his desperate need to fulfill his creative promise. As his genius threatens to destroy his relationship with his parents and community, he must make a difficult choice between art and faith.

This stirring coming-of-age tale is based on the novel by Chaim Potok. Set within a Hasidic community in Brooklyn, its exploration of family, tradition, culture, faith and the search for identity resonates universally.

Published in 1972, *My Name is Asher Lev* is widely considered one of Chaim Potok’s best works. In 2009, director and playwright Aaron Posner adapted the novel for the stage at Philadelphia’s Arden Theatre Company, of which Posner is co-founder. *My Name is Asher Lev* has since gone on to receive numerous productions across the United States, as well as Canadian productions at the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre and Montreal’s Segal Centre. Studio 180 Theatre and Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company are pleased to be collaborating on the play’s Toronto premiere.

My Name is Asher Lev has earned numerous prestigious awards, including the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best New Play following its Off-Broadway premiere at the Westside Theater in 2012.

CONTENT: *My Name is Asher Lev* is suitable for all high school audiences. The play contains some strong language.

If you have questions or concerns about the content of the play, or wish to receive an electronic reading copy, please do not hesitate to contact us at education@studio180theatre.com or 416-962-1800.

The Playwright – Aaron Posner (born 1964)

Aaron Posner is a Jewish American director and playwright based in Chicago. He was the co-founder and former Artistic Director of Philadelphia's Arden Theatre Company and has directed at major theatres across the United States including American Players Theatre, Ford's Theatre, Folger Shakespeare Theatre, Portland Center Stage, Seattle Rep, Arizona Theatre Company, Actors Theatre of Louisville, The Alliance Theatre, and Round House Theatre.

Posner received his undergraduate degree in performance studies at Northwestern University and went on to do an MFA at Southern Methodist University, where he met the influential Hungarian-born director John Hirsch. However, Posner discovered that the program at SMU was not a good fit for him and he left and moved to Philadelphia where he started the Arden Theatre with Northwestern pal Terrence J. Nolen.

As a playwright, Posner has made a name for himself as an adapter of novels and classical plays. His acclaimed adaptation of Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, which he co-wrote with the author, put him on the map and *My Name is Asher Lev* continues to enjoy numerous productions across North America. Most recently, he has achieved great success with his contemporary and irreverent adaptations of plays by Shakespeare and Chekhov including *District Merchants (The Merchant of Venice)*, *No Sisters (Three Sisters)* and *Stupid Fucking Bird (The Seagull)*, which recently enjoyed a successful indie run in Toronto, by The Bird Collective.

To learn more about Aaron Posner and his approach to adapting and directing theatre, check out this wonderful American Theatre article:

<http://www.americantheatre.org/2016/09/28/aaron-posners-many-hats/>

The Author – Chaim Potok (1929 – 2002)

Chaim Potok was a Jewish American author and rabbi, best known for his celebrated first novel *The Chosen*. Written in 1967, it remained on the New York Times bestseller list for 39 weeks and has sold millions of copies worldwide. Subsequent novels include *The Promise*, *My Name is Asher Lev*, *In the Beginning*, *The Book of Lights*, *Davita's Harp*, *The Gift of Asher Lev*, *I Am The Clay* and his last book, a collection of three novellas called *Old Men At Midnight*. His body of work also contains many nonfiction publications and several books for children. His plays include *Out of Depths*, *Sins of the Father* and *The Play of Lights*. He served as editor for both *Conservative Judaism* and the Jewish Publication Society.

Potok was born in the Bronx, NY, to Polish immigrant parents. He received an Orthodox Jewish education and was ordained as a Conservative rabbi at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He also earned a master's degree in English Literature and a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania. In addition to Potok's literary and editorial accomplishments, he served as a chaplain for the U.S. Army during the Korean War, as a director of Camp Ramah in Nyack, NY, and as a faculty member of the University of Judaism and the Teachers' Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary. A husband and father of three, Potok initially settled in Brooklyn, NY, before relocating to Jerusalem, Israel for seven years. In 1977 he returned to the U.S. with his family and settled in Merion – an affluent suburb of Philadelphia.

Potok was also an accomplished painter. In fact, Asher Lev's controversial painting "Brooklyn Crucifixion" is based on his own work.

F. Attending the Play

Prior to the performance, please ensure that your students are well-prepared. The better prepared they are, the more they will get out of the experience. The following guidelines should help you and your students get the most out of attending *My Name is Asher Lev*:

- **Please arrive early.** When travelling in the city, whether by school bus or TTC, it is always best to leave extra time in case of traffic or transit delays. We are proud to promote a multi-generational experience during our weekday matinées. Our audiences include student groups as well as general adult audience members and the **matinées begin promptly at 1PM**. To avoid disruption, **LATECOMERS may not be admitted**.
- **All photography and recording of the performance is strictly prohibited.**
- Please impress upon your students the importance of **turning off all cell phones**, music players and other electronic devices. If students understand *why* it is important to refrain from using electronics, they will be more likely to adhere to this etiquette. **Remind students that they will be seeing people performing live** and, as a rule, if you can see and hear the actors, the actors can see and hear you. Even text messaging – with its distracting, glowing light – is extremely disruptive in the theatre. **Please be courteous.**
- **Outside food and beverages are not permitted in the auditorium.** Spills are messy and noisy snacks and bottles can be disruptive for performers and patrons alike. Please ensure that students have the opportunity to eat lunch prior to attending the performance. There are many affordable food options in the immediate vicinity of the Toronto Centre for the Arts if students wish to arrive early and purchase lunch before the show.
- **We encourage student responses and feedback.** After all Wednesday matinée and Thursday evening performances, we offer a talkback (Q&A) session. We are interested in hearing what our audiences have to say and engaging in a dialogue inspired by the play. If students are aware of the post-show talkback, they will be better prepared to formulate questions during the performance – and they will remember to remain in their seats following curtain call! After the show, kindly take the time to complete our online [Teacher/Student Response Form \(studio180theatre.com/education-feedback\)](http://studio180theatre.com/education-feedback), or use the forms included in this Guide in **Section B**, and ask your students to do the same. Your feedback is extremely valuable to us!

G. Glossary

Torah	The sacred scroll of the Jewish people, containing the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and encompassing God's commandments and laws. Each copy of the Torah is inscribed by hand on parchment and is often wrapped in elaborately decorated coverings and embellished with ornaments. It is housed in an ark in the sanctuary of the synagogue.
Hasidism	An ultra-Orthodox branch of Judaism in which men and women assume separate roles and responsibilities and observe strict adherence to the Torah – the laws of traditional Judaism (including laws governing food, clothing, prayer, and many other aspects of life). For <i>My Name is Asher Lev</i> , author Chaim Potok invented a fictitious sect of Hasidism called "Ladover Hasidic," modelled on one of the largest Hasidic movements, Chabad-Lubavitch.
blasphemy	The speaking-out against or demonstration of contempt for God.
goyim	A Yiddish word for a non-Jew. Sometimes pejorative.
Eretz Yisrael	Hebrew for "Land of Israel." The Jewish state is considered a Holy Land for Jews, Christians and Muslims.
messiah/moshiach	A man chosen by God who will bring an end to all evil in the world and will usher in a new global order of peace and prosperity.
sitra achra	Yiddish phrase for "the other side" referring to evil or unholiness.
Chagall	Russian artist Marc Chagall (1887-1985) was a renowned Jewish artist of the 20 th century, best known for his paintings and stained glass works. He drew from Russian Jewish folk tradition during a time of extreme anti-Semitism and oppression.
Rebbe	A Hasidic community's spiritual leader, who acts as teacher and advisor.
Ribbono shel Oylom	A Yiddish reference to God, meaning "Master of the Universe."
Talmud	Rabbinic interpretations and teachings based on the Hebrew Bible.
yeshiva	A place of study devoted to Talmudic teaching.
bris	A Jewish rite of passage – the circumcision of an eight-day-old baby boy.
Bar Mitzvah	Important rite of passage for 13 year-old Jewish boys, where they are first called upon to read from the Torah and are welcomed as adult members of the community.
payos	Long side-locks of hair worn by Hasidic men.
shofar	A ritual instrument fashioned from a ram's horn and blown in the synagogue during the High Holy Days.
Florence	Italian city and a European centre of art and culture.

H. Topics for Discussion and Classroom Activities

1. *Theatrical Presentation*

a) ISSUE-BASED THEATRE

Studio 180 Theatre produces plays that speak to socially and politically relevant issues. With your class, examine the company's Vision and Mission statements.

Vision: The experience of live performance inspires people to engage more fully in the world.

Mission: To produce socially relevant theatre that provokes public discourse and promotes community engagement.

1. What do these statements mean to you? How effectively do you think the company's Mission serves its Vision? How does this production of *My Name is Asher Lev* work toward fulfilling our Mission?
2. **Why live theatre?** What makes theatre an effective art form through which to explore themes, issues and human behaviour? The fictional account of Asher Lev already exists in the Chaim Potok novel. Why do you think playwright Aaron Posner was compelled to adapt the novel for the stage? Why do you think theatre companies have chosen to share the play with audiences rather than just recommending that folks read the book? Consider what is specific about your intellectual, emotional and communal responses to attending live theatre compared to engaging in other forms of art, such as reading a novel.
•HINT: *How does live theatre HUMANIZE issues and why is the humanization of social and political issues important?*
3. Brainstorm issues that you would like to see turned into a piece of theatre. If you were going to see another play, or write a play yourself, what would you want it to be about? This question may serve as a jumping off point for **drama students** to begin their own issue-based theatre projects around stories and topics of particular relevance to them.

b) TELLING JEWISH STORIES

The Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company honours stories by Jewish artists and those that reflect the Jewish experience. The company is founded on the belief that **these stories have to be told and need to be seen**. What does this fundamental value mean to you? Why do you think it is essential for Jewish stories to be seen and heard by contemporary audiences in Toronto? What is the impact on Jewish and non-Jewish audiences? How does the Harold Green mandate resonate in light of dramatically increasing incidents of overt anti-Semitism both in our own communities and across North America? In the current political climate, what function can the theatre serve for Toronto's Jewish population and for our communities at large?

c) PRODUCING PARTNERSHIP

Reflecting on questions **1a** and **1b**, within our current political climate, how might Studio 180 and Harold Green be aligned as producing partners with a shared vision? What is the connection between socially relevant plays and the telling of Jewish stories?

d) POINTS OF VIEW – CHARACTERS

How effective is *My Name is Asher Lev* at exploring **multiple perspectives or points of view**? Was the play even-handed? Did you feel that a multitude of opinions and points of view were expressed? Were the characters portrayed fairly? Do you believe an even-handed or fair portrayal is important when it comes to seeing a play? Which characters and stories were the most memorable? Which voices remained with you the longest and why? Which moments had the greatest impact? Which characters surprised you? Did the play create questions for you regarding the characters or their circumstances? Did you form an emotional attachment to any of the characters? Who were you rooting for? Who did you want to see more of? Did you disagree with what some of the characters were saying or doing? What would you ask those characters, given the opportunity?

e) POINTS OF VIEW – PLAYWRIGHT

What is the playwright's point of view regarding the characters and their circumstances? Who is Aaron Posner rooting for? Is he taking a side?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

During an exploration of the questions above there might well be as many different answers as there are students in the class. Use this discussion to **highlight the significant role the audience plays at the theatre** and how audience interpretation is equally as important as the author's intention. **SCULPTING** is a fun activity that illustrates this concept.

Activity goals:

- Get students out of their heads and into their bodies in a fun and creative way
- Challenge students to express themselves physically
- Enhance verbal and non-verbal communication and cooperation skills
- Explore the exciting ways in which art can have multiple meanings and interpretations for both the creator and the audience/viewer

Step by step:

1. Select one student to be the SCULPTOR and four students to be the CLAY.
2. Select a title for the sculpture (this can be designated by the teacher or offered by the class – we like to use theme-based words from the play but you can also use your imagination and come up with things like invented play or movie titles).
3. Designate a brief amount of time (10–30 seconds) in which the SCULPTOR may sculpt.
4. The SCULPTOR must then use the designated title to silently create a sculpture in the allotted time. This can be done with MIRRORING (the SCULPTOR positions him or herself and the CLAY must imitate precisely) or by physically positioning the CLAY.
5. Ask the SCULPTOR to describe their masterpiece and then invite class members (art critics, gallery patrons, etc.) to describe what they see.
6. The activity can be repeated in any number of configurations (e.g., in pairs, with multiple groups of three, four, five or more, etc.)

f) DESIGN

How did the design of the production affect the presentation of the piece? How effective was the **set** in defining the space? What mood or ambience was created? How did **colour, texture and space** add to the theatrical experience? How was **lighting** used to create mood or ambience? How did lighting work to define space and setting? How did the set and the lights work in combination with one another? How was **sound** used to affect the presentation? How were **costumes** used to define characters? How were costumes used to evoke the **historical period** of the play? How did the costume designer make use of **colour, texture and style**?

In the published script of *My Name is Asher Lev*, playwright Aaron Posner introduces the work with “A Note on the Play and the Playing.” He writes:

Nothing should get in the way of Asher’s story. Although, as it is about great art, it certainly doesn’t hurt if there is a little beauty in the design, too...

One essential note: Asher’s artwork should never be seen in any form. Blank pages. Empty frames. Unpainted canvases. Any attempt to show us his work only will lessen it and interfere with the audience’s own imagination and its capacity to draw and paint the work itself.

Why does the audience never see any of Asher Lev’s paintings? What was it like, as an audience member, to experience the story in this way?

g) ACTING

Playwright Aaron Posner is also an accomplished director. In “A Note on the Play and the Playing,” he includes the following instructions for directors and actors of future productions:

Also, Asher “plays” himself at six, seven, ten... ages not easy for an adult to fully enact on stage. It is perhaps best if he simply suggests these ages, rather than trying to fully embody them. That is what we tend to do when we tell stories, don’t you find? We suggest, we imply... Also, he does not necessarily need to be “in scene” when he is playing a very young boy but can simply toss his voice into the scene. I found it helpful, too, not to have him fully standing up and talking directly to the adults until the second movement.

Did you find this production adhered to Posner’s instructions? Are these effective guidelines? Why or why not? What was the effect of this style of playing as opposed to a more naturalistic approach to the scenes?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Drama students should explore creative ways to play multiple roles within the same scene. Using the script of *Asher Lev* or another play that demands this playing style, have students rehearse scenes in which actors are required to take on different characters, or the same character at various ages. Challenge students to play across age and gender, experimenting with various techniques from the most literal to subtle suggestions through physical and vocal choices. Have fun with it!

There are so many great plays to choose from. A few suggestions: *The Laramie Project* by Tectonic Theatre Project, *Summer of My Amazing Luck* by Christopher Craddock, *The 39 Steps* by Patrick Barlow, and *Bed and Breakfast* by Mark Crawford.

Playwright Aaron Posner begins the play with a stage direction that sets the scene and introduces Asher Lev:

He looks at us, the audience, for a while as he chooses how to begin his defense, his non-apology, his explanation, his explication. His story...

What information does this give the director and actor about what Asher Lev is doing and what he wants? What do these words mean to you? How do these instructions reflect Asher's need to be understood? What does this tell you about the importance of telling our own stories?

h) ADAPTATION

My Name is Asher Lev began life as a novel by Chaim Potok and was adapted for the stage by Aaron Posner. As a class, discuss some of the differences between literature and drama. How is the experience of engaging with a book similar or different to that of a play? What about Asher Lev's story lends itself to being told in this dramatic form? What are the artists able to accomplish in a live performance that a book cannot convey? What is lost in the telling when the story moves from the page to the stage?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Have students read *My Name is Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok and respond either in a report or group conversation about the similarities and differences between the novel and the play. Focus the conversation on the experience of the reader or audience member and how they are provoked emotionally and intellectually by each art form.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY

Try your hand at adaptation! Have students select something they have read recently and adapt it into a script to be performed by their fellow students. Have them consider which stories they have heard that demand a retelling – which stories demand a broader audience? Do you have a unique point of view to bring to the retelling? How can your particular perspective illuminate the themes, characters, or questions of the story? How can theatre be used specifically to enhance the telling of the story? In the crafting of your script, how can you use live performance to great effect? What can theatre do that other art forms cannot?

2. Identity

When I was young, I would often look at myself in the mirror for a long time. Not for vanity. But because I was so curious about the person on the other side.

– Asher Lev

a) WHO AM I?

Central to *My Name is Asher Lev* is the title character's quest to discover his authentic self. What are some of the **obstacles** Asher struggles with as he grapples with questions of his identity? Does he overcome these obstacles and, if so, how?

b) TRUTH & AUTHENTICITY

What does it mean to be one's authentic self? How do we know when we are being true to ourselves? What are the external forces in Asher's life that threaten his ability to be his most authentic self, and how does he struggle with and/or overcome them? What pressures or influences can you recognize as threatening your own authenticity (e.g. parental pressure, peer pressure, media messages, social media, etc.)? Consider the following words that Asher speaks to his mother early in the play – have a group conversation about what Asher means, and what the author is saying about the importance of truth and authenticity:

“The world is not pretty! I won't draw it that way.” – Asher Lev

c) FEAR OF LOSS

How does a fear of loss contribute to Asher's struggle? What is he afraid of losing or giving up as he pursues his artistic passion? Does he experience loss throughout the play, and if so, how does he cope with it?

d) CULTURE & RELIGION

A fundamental aspect of Asher's identity is his **culture and religion**. How is Asher's struggle unique to Hasidic Jews? Can you imagine a similar play being written about a person from another culture and/or religion? If you are Jewish, how did this aspect of Asher's identity resonate with you? If you are not Jewish, did you find you were able to relate to Asher's personal journey?

e) THE NEED TO BE UNDERSTOOD

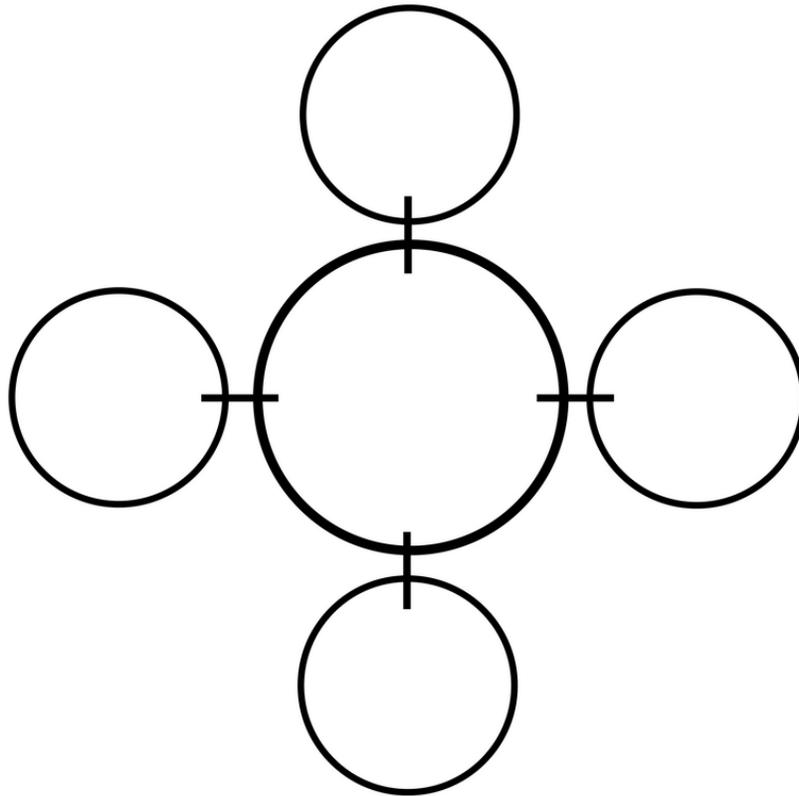
My Name is Asher Lev is written in four “movements.” The third movement is entitled *The Act of Creation* – it is adult Asher's impassioned speech explaining the process of painting his controversial works *Brooklyn Crucifixion I* and *Brooklyn Crucifixion II*. At the end he asks the audience: “Do you understand? Do you understand?” **What does Asher need us to understand?** What do you think the playwright is showing us about the **connection between being true to ourselves and being understood by those around us?** How do you connect personally to this idea? Think of a time when you felt you were not understood. How did that affect you? Think of a time when you felt like someone truly understood you – how did that feel?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY – CIRCLES OF MY SELF

This activity highlights the multiple dimensions of our identities. It addresses the importance of individuals self-defining their identities and challenging stereotypes.

Draw a circle in the centre of a page and then draw four satellite circles surrounding it – each connected to the centre with a straight line. Place your name in the centre circle and write an important aspect of your identity in each of the satellite circles – an identifier or descriptor that you feel is important in defining you. This can be anything: female, brother, Asian, athlete, Taoist, Muslim, or any descriptor with which you identify.

1. Share a story about a time you were especially proud to identify yourself with one of the descriptors you used above.
2. Share a story about a time it was especially painful to be identified with one of your identifiers or descriptors.
3. Name a stereotype associated with one of the groups with which you identify that is not consistent with who you are. Fill in the following sentence: I am (a/an) _____, but I am NOT (a/an) _____. (For example, if one of my identifiers is “Christian,” and I think a stereotype is that all Christians are radical fundamentalists, my sentence would be: “I am a Christian, but I am NOT a radical fundamentalist.”)



SUGGESTED ACTIVITY – MY NAME IS...

What does the title of the play mean to you? Why do you think Chaim Potok chose this title? What does Asher Lev's name mean to him? **What does your name mean to you?**

Provide students with the prompt: "My name is..." and have them respond in a way that best suits the class and your area of study. English and Writer's Craft students can respond with a personal essay or poem. Drama students can write and perform monologues. Visual art students should respond in their chosen medium (drawing, painting, sculpture, etc.).

Guide the project with additional prompts, such as:

- What is the linguistic origin of your name?
- Does your name have a cultural, national or religious origin?
- Are you named after someone?
- Do you share your name with other members of your family?
- Do you know the story of how your name was selected?
- Do you have a nickname?

3. Family, Faith & Tradition

a) TRADITION

What are the two traditions of which Asher Lev is a part? What does the play have to say about each of these traditions? How are they in conflict with one another? What does tradition mean to you? Do you consider yourself to be a part of a tradition? Consider examples such as culture, religion, nationality, sports teams, artistic pursuits, etc. Have you experienced tradition as being fulfilling, comforting or enriching? Are there ways in which you experience tradition as being stifling, limiting or challenging? Discuss.

b) FAMILY, CULTURE & RELIGION

Discuss the importance of family, culture and religion in Asher's life. What are the positive, comforting and enriching elements, and when does he struggle with his family tradition? Do Asher's circumstances resonate for you? As a class, share your personal experiences of family, culture and tradition as they relate to Asher's experiences. Students should be encouraged to listen respectfully to one another to experience the many ways our families and traditions are diverse and connected. Can you identify cross-cultural similarities? Can you empathize with someone whose family experience is very different from your own?

c) FAITH V. QUESTIONING

Consider what Asher says about the Rebbe, the spiritual leader of the Ladover Hasidim (which is actually a fictitious sect of Hasidic Judaism invented by Chaim Potok, based on the Chabad-Lubavitch sect):

The word of the *Rebbe* is absolute and unquestionable. He guides our lives, singly, and as a community.

– Asher Lev

How is this notion of an absolute and unquestionable leader in conflict with the role of the artist in society? How does Asher struggle with this conflict? How do the other characters in the play experience faith and absolute adherence to rules and tradition? Can you relate to this struggle in any way? Are there elements of your family, tradition, culture, faith or religion that are absolute? How might this be comforting? How might this present a challenge? Remind students that this discussion is an open and judgement-free exchange. It is about listening to one another and learning about our diverse experiences – not about convincing anyone of the “right” way to be or the “right” tradition to follow or challenge.

d) REBELLION

Only one who has mastered a tradition has the right to add to it or rebel against it.

– Asher Lev

What do you think of Asher's assertion? How does this statement apply to painting? How might it apply to other traditions?

4. *Role of the Artist*

a) RESPONSIBILITY

You have a gift, Asher Lev. You have a *responsibility*.

– Jacob Kahn

What does Asher's teacher Jacob Kahn mean by this? What do you think of this statement? Does it resonate or ring false? If you were Asher Lev, would you agree or disagree with this statement and why?

b) INTERPRETER & COMMENTATOR

How do the different characters in the play see the role of the artist in society (e.g. Asher, Jacob, Aryeh)? Which point of view resonates most with you? What do you think the role of an artist in society should be — interpreter, commentator, passive observer, leader, political influencer? Anything else?

You can use the following excerpts from the play as a springboard for your discussion:

An artist either reflects his life, or comments on it. That is the only way to make art that is...*worthwhile*.

– Jacob Kahn

The artist is a filter, an interpreter...a *mediator* of the experience. A *commentator*. A *commentator* on the experience...

– Asher Lev

c) COMMUNICATION

I don't want to sit in a room painting for myself! Art is a way of communicating, of connecting with the world. I want to share what I do. And I want my fellow artists and critics to see my work, to understand.

– Asher Lev

Discuss Asher Lev's beliefs about art as communication. Does this resonate for you? Why or why not? How does the way Asher sees his role as an artist connect to his need to be understood? Do you think Asher's point of view is the same as the author's? Can someone be an artist if their work is kept private and never shared with others? Is there a difference between making art and being an artist?

I. The Creative Team

As a homework assignment, you might want to ask your students to write **reviews** or **responses** to *My Name is Asher Lev*. The following lists of cast and production team members may come in handy for these assignments. The section below, ***The Parts We Play***, will provide some insight into how a production like ours is realized. Company bios can be found in the show programme you will receive at the performance.

Cast

Jonas Chernick	Asher Lev
Ron Lea	Aryeh Lev and Others
Sarah Orenstein	Rivkeh Lev and Others

Production Team

Joel Greenberg	Director
Laura Baxter	Stage Manager
Bradley Dunn	Assistant Stage Manager
Nathaniel Kennedy	Production Manager
Brandon Kleiman	Set & Costume Designer
Kimberly Purtell	Lighting Designer
Thomas Ryder Payne	Sound Designer
Mary Spyraakis	Head of Props

The Parts We Play

The above-listed roles may be familiar to you – but what exactly does each member of the creative team *do*? The role of the actor is the most obvious since the actors are the people you actually see onstage. But what do other people contribute to the creation of a play? Who is present in the rehearsal hall? What goes on behind the scenes during the show? And what happens before rehearsals even begin? The following job descriptions will begin to answer these questions and, we hope, provoke a series of new questions among your students.

The Actors

The work of an actor begins long before they appear onstage. A major part of any actor’s job involves working to *get* a job. This involves the audition process whereby the actor is given material to prepare (either one or two monologues of their choice or a section of the script from the specific play) that the actor presents to the director. In some cases, a director may hold a “callback” audition, in which case the actor returns for a second or even third round, often performing the material with other actors being considered for the play.

In some cases, as was the case with *My Name is Asher Lev*, actors are offered roles without being asked to audition. This typically occurs with experienced actors whose body of work is well known to the director and/or producer. Sometimes the director has worked with them on previous projects (as is the case with Sarah Orenstein and Jonas Chernick), and other times the director has admired an actor’s work from afar, in other plays. This is the case with Ron Lea, who is making his Studio 180 Theatre debut.

Before rehearsals begin, it is the actor’s job to learn as much as possible about the play and their character. This individual preparation process is different for every actor, but can involve re-reading the script for information and “clues” and doing extended research on the subject matter, time period, source material or historical background of the play.

Once in the rehearsal hall, actors typically rehearse eight hours a day, six days a week. For *My Name is Asher Lev* we had three weeks of rehearsal in the rehearsal hall. We then moved into “tech week,” which involves rehearsal in the actual theatre and incorporates sets, lighting, sound and costumes.

We had four “previews.” These are performances for a paying audience and serve as a sort of trial run for the company. During previews, critics are not permitted to attend and write about the show (unless they are granted special permission) and the company may still rehearse between performances. It is a time for trial and error in front of an audience, and changes can still be made to just about every element of the production.

After “Opening Night” the production is set. There are no more rehearsals and artistic choices have been finalized. Actors then perform *My Name is Asher Lev* seven times a week – five evening performances and two matinées.

The Director

The director is responsible for the creative vision of the production. They must coordinate with every member of the artistic, technical and administrative teams to achieve that vision. The director works closely with the designers to ensure the look of the production is coherent and serves the play; guides the actors towards realizing the truth of their characters and circumstances; and, together with the actors, is responsible for establishing the physical reality of the piece.

The director’s job ends on Opening Night. Once the show is “open,” they can no longer call the actors into a rehearsal or request changes to the sets, costumes, etc. At this point in the process, the leadership shifts from the director to the stage manager.

The Stage Manager (SM)

If an SM is doing their job well, you will hardly know they are there, but everything — from the first day of rehearsal, to the moment the final set piece is loaded into a truck to take into storage after closing — will have run with ease. Most often, their job officially begins a week prior to the first rehearsal, during “prep week.” This is when they make sure the script, rehearsal studio and personnel are ready for day one. Some key stage management duties in the rehearsal hall include organizing, communicating and keeping track of the daily schedule; maintaining the “prompt script,” which is a record of all the blocking, sound, lighting and other technical cues; making sure the actors are getting all of their lines right; and organizing any props, set or costume pieces (in the rehearsal hall usually “rehearsal props” and “rehearsal costumes” are used before the real ones are available).

Once the show is open, the SM is the captain of the ship. They make sure everyone arrives on time and stays on track, and they are responsible for solving every problem from a flubbed line or burnt-out light bulb to a complete power outage, fire alarm or show cancellation. They are also responsible for the safety of the cast and play an important role in ensuring the physical and emotional well-being of the company.

The SM also “calls the show” while sitting in a booth with technicians who push the buttons for every sound, lighting and special effect cue – when the SM tells them to. The SM must simultaneously keep an eye on everything happening on *and* off stage, making sure that every member of the cast and crew is staying on track.

The Assistant Stage Manager (ASM)

As the name suggests, the ASM essentially assists the SM. They offer support to the SM during rehearsals, often taking responsibility for things like props, rehearsal costume pieces and keeping the rehearsal hall in order. They may also have the task of helping the actors learn their lines during times when their scenes are not being rehearsed.

Once the company moves from the rehearsal hall into the theatre, the ASM assumes control of the backstage area for the duration of the show's run. Some common ASM duties include organizing and controlling the backstage traffic during the show; ensuring actors are in place to make their entrances onto the stage; taking responsibility for props and costumes (if there is not a separate wardrobe person or dresser); being in charge of "pre-sets" (all the props, sets and costumes that must be in place at the beginning of the play); daily laundry and occasional dry cleaning (again, if there is not a separate wardrobe person); and assisting with costume quick-changes and prop hand-offs. The ASM remains in constant communication with the SM in the booth through a headset so that, together, the stage management team can address any issues that arise (e.g., broken set pieces or props, a sick actor, disruptive audience members). In some larger theatres such as the Greenwin Theatre at the Toronto Centre for the Arts, which are run by IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees) union crews, the ASM's responsibilities are more limited during production, since all backstage technical elements (props, microphones, sets, costumes, etc.) are handled by IATSE crew members.

The Production Manager (PM)

The Production Manager oversees all elements of the production. They are usually a mid-career to senior-level professional with considerable technical theatre experience and, frequently, experience as an SM. The PM undertakes a balancing act – making sure the show stays on budget while ensuring that all designers and technicians have the resources and support they require. The PM supervises the progress of the designers, technicians and other staff members, keeping everyone on schedule so that sets, props, costumes, lights, special effects and all other physical components of the show are ready for opening night. They are a behind-the-scenes member of the company and, like the SM, will be indiscernible to the audience, even though they have been working around the clock since long before rehearsals even began.

The Set Designer

The work of the set designer is the first thing that catches the eye of the audience. Before you even find your seat, you observe the set (or at least the set for the beginning of the play) – this establishes the mood of the show and gives you clues as to what you are about to experience.

Most of the set designer's work happens long before rehearsals begin. They work closely with both the director and the script itself to determine what the physical reality of the production will be. Then, within the parameters of a designated budget, they must balance available resources with the needs of the production. The set designer must take into account questions such as: *Where does the play take place? Is it a literal or an abstract space? How many locations are indicated in the script? What essential physical components are there (e.g., a functioning door, stairs, a trap door in the floor, a window, trees, etc.)? How can the themes of the play be physically and/or symbolically represented?*

Just as the actors must mine the script for clues about how to play their characters, so must the set designer interpret the playwright's vision. In some cases, the playwright may have given explicit instructions. In *My Name is Asher Lev*, Aaron Posner writes, "It should be simple, direct and straightforward. When in doubt, simpler is better. Nothing should get in the way of Asher's

story. Although, as it is about great art, it certainly doesn't hurt if there is a little beauty in the design, too..."

Once the designer and director agree upon a design concept, the designer will create sketches and a three-dimensional model (called a maquette) that is presented to the company on the first day of rehearsal. They will then supervise the crew that builds the set, ensuring that their vision is fully realized.

The Costume Designer

As the title suggests, the costume designer is responsible for everything the actors wear on stage. Depending upon the needs of the play and factors such as budget, they may design costumes that are built explicitly for the show, or they may rent or purchase clothes to create the desired look.

Like the set designer, the costume designer relies on both the script and the director's vision to come up with their designs. In many cases, set and costumes may be designed by the same person. This is the case for *My Name is Asher Lev*. This helps achieve a unified aesthetic. When set and costumes are designed by two different people, the designers often work closely together to harmonize their ideas.

Prior to the start of rehearsals, the costume designer must have a great deal of their work accomplished so that the actors can incorporate the physical realities of their characters into their performances. On day one of rehearsal, the costume designer will typically present costume sketches for each character, to which the company may refer throughout the rehearsal process. As rehearsals progress, the designer will supervise "fittings" during which the actors try on their costumes, and will have the pieces altered accordingly.

The costume designer will participate throughout the tech rehearsal period, making adjustments until everything is just so. The smallest costume detail can have a great impact on the actor. The shoes an actor wears will heavily influence the way the character walks and moves around the stage; the choice of fabric will determine how warm or cool an actor will feel; costume pieces from historical periods such as corsets and hats will significantly impact posture and carriage and will influence character choices. Every pocket, accessory, wig or pair of glasses can be a transformative element for a character, and the designer selects everything with care and precision.

The Lighting Designer

For most theatregoers, the lighting design of a play will be far less apparent than sets or costumes; yet, lighting is a crucial component of any production. The lighting designer creates the mood and sets the tone of the piece. The lighting can indicate whether the characters are indoors or outdoors, whether it is day or night, hot or cold, sunny or cloudy. Through lighting, a designer can put us in a forest, behind a window, under the sea. For a play such as *My Name is Asher Lev* which incorporates a minimalistic, abstract and fluid set design, the lighting design is all the more essential to define space, time, location, etc.

Like the other designers, the lighting designer pays close attention to the script and to the director's vision. They watch rehearsals early on in the process to get a feel for the play and to gain an understanding of what the lighting requirements will be. They must then work within their assigned budget to determine which lighting instruments they will use, precisely where each instrument will be placed, which colours they will use and how each instrument will work together to create the desired effect of each lighting configuration or "cue."

Once all the lights are hung and focused in the theatre, the lighting designer demonstrates each of the lighting states they have created for the director and makes appropriate changes until the desired effect is achieved. Next, the actors are brought into the theatre to go through their blocking, bringing the set, costumes, and lighting design together for the first time. The designer can make final adjustments and the actors and director can adjust blocking to complement the lighting design.

The Sound Designer

The mood and ambience of a show are also built through the creative use of sound. A sound designer's job may involve creating sound effects (such as street traffic, a doorbell or the sound of crickets), selecting or even composing music, or creating soundscapes and vocal recordings. Some sound cues may be obvious from the script, such as the requirement of a ringing telephone. Others are born of the designer's imagination and enhance the production by contributing to the mood, feel, intensity or rhythm of the piece.

Head of Props

Short for "properties," props are all the objects used by the actors in the play. Every paintbrush, telephone, book, etc., is carefully selected in keeping with the physical needs of the play as well as the period and design concept. For a production on the scale of *My Name is Asher Lev*, the Head of Props works independently, in consultation with the director and designers, to purchase or create all required props. On a larger-scale production with more extensive prop requirements, they will supervise additional artists and technicians who build the props.

POST-SHOW ACTIVITY A

Have each student select one member of the company of *My Name is Asher Lev* and write a report on how their role contributed to the overall production. For example, a report on the set and costume designer Brandon Kleiman might include a description of the set and costumes and a specific analysis of how they contributed to the student's experience of the play. Was the set realistic or abstract? What feelings did the design evoke? How did the costumes contribute to your understanding of each character? How did the design signify the play's setting – the time period and location of the play?

POST-SHOW ACTIVITY B

Assign the following research project: Each student selects one member of a production or theatre's creative team. Roles can include those not listed for *My Name is Asher Lev* such as Dramaturge, Choreographer or Fight Director. Have students contact professionals at theatres throughout the city and interview them about the roles they play and the various elements of their jobs. Have students present their findings so the class may compare how roles differ from theatre to theatre and show to show. We will happily put students in touch with some of our own artists and technicians, though their research need not be limited to Studio 180 Theatre or the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company. It will be fun for students to present findings from a broad range of Canadian theatres, all of whom vary in size, budget, location and mandate.