

# Alliance Theatre

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*institute*

## **Dramaturgy Guide**

*Fires, Ohio*

by Warren Levi Haney, Teaching Artist  
with: Charity Jordan & Yesenia Ozuna  
and: students at the Stilwell School of the Arts



FEB 25 – MAR 22, 2026

Hertz Stage

Recommended for Grades 9-12

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### Georgia Standards of Excellence:

#### Language Arts:

- 6.T.RA.2 Curating Sources & Evidence Utilize multiple print and digital texts to address a specific topic or question, assessing source credibility and relevance and integrating evidence properly to avoid plagiarism.
  - 6.T.RA.2.a Locate evidence in print and digital sources to support a central idea or question, recording basic bibliographic information, such as author, title, and page number.
- 10.LDOMAIN: Language (L) Students learn and apply the structures and conventions of standard English. Students observe and analyze how grammar works in reading and writing. Students build vocabularies and determine word meanings as they relate to reading and writing.
- 10.TDOMAIN: Texts (T) Students grow in their learning as they purposefully engage with texts.

#### Georgia Standards of Excellence for Fine Arts:

- TAHSTL.CR.1 Develop original theatre literature.
  - TAHSTL.CR.1.a Compare and summarize theatre literature from various historical periods, cultures, and styles.
  - TAHSTL.CR.1.b Examine and outline the steps and conventions involved in the creation of a theatre text.
  - TAHSTL.CR.1.c Develop original texts using theatre techniques (e.g. improvisation, adapting non-theatre literature, playwriting exercises).
- TAHSTL.RE.1 Evaluate various aspects of theatre literature using appropriate supporting evidence.

- TAHSTL.RE.1.a Develop and apply a set of comprehensive criteria for theatre text analysis.
- TAHSTL.RE.1.b Compare and contrast theatre texts to live/film performance.
- TAHSTL.CN.1 Connect theatre literature to its dramaturgical contexts and other disciplines.
  - TAHSTL.CN.1.a Trace the development of theatre from earliest forms to contemporary forms.
  - TAHSTL.CN.1.b Identify and summarize contributions made to the development of theatre literature by different cultures and traditions.
  - TAHSTL.CN.1.c Research and explain how cultural and historical factors have influenced playwrights and theatre literature.
  - TAHSTL.CN.1.d Identify the elements, influences, and contributions of other art forms and content areas to theatre literature.

## About the Play

### Synopsis

As wildfires rage closer and closer to a small Ohio college town, the mopey grown children and second wife of a sort-of-mediocre professor are threatened by another kind of crisis: a visit from a family friend that threatens to bring all of their tensions to a towering inferno. Now, each of them will be forced to choose: stay and smolder, or leave and burn? Inspired by the classic family drama *Uncle Vanya*, *Fires, Ohio* updates a beloved story for our painfully absurd present, taking a hilarious and heartfelt look at the natural (and personal) disasters that transform our everyday lives. In addition to winning the 22nd annual Alliance/Kendeda National Graduate Playwriting Competition, *Fires, Ohio* has been awarded the Kennedy Center's Paula Vogel Award and the Mark Twain Prize for Comic Playwriting.

### The Playwright



Beth Hyland is a playwright and screenwriter based in Southern California. Her play *Sylvia Sylvia Sylvia* will receive its world premiere at the Geffen Playhouse in February 2026, directed by Jo Bonney. Her play *Fires, Ohio* was the winner of the 2025 Alliance/Kendeda Graduate Playwriting Prize and will receive its world premiere at the Alliance Theatre in March 2026. She is the 2024 recipient of the L. Arnold Weissberger Prize and Jay Harris New Play Commission and a two-time recipient of the Kennedy Center's KCACTF Mark Twain Award for Comic Playwriting. She currently holds commissions from Manhattan Theatre Club/Sloan, Williamstown Theatre Festival, and Rivendell Theatre. Her plays and musicals include *Sylvia Sylvia Sylvia* (Geffen Playhouse, Williamstown Theatre Festival), *Fires, Ohio* (Alliance Theatre, Portland Center Stage, Goodman Theatre, The Story Theatre), *Cancelina* (Wagner New Play Festival, Baby Teeth, Bramble Theatre), *Baby Shower Katie* (Round House Theatre), *Seagulls* (The Sound at Steppenwolf LookOut, Octagon Bolton, Oak Park Festival Theatre), and *Clearing* (Commission Theatre, A Short Leap). She is currently pursuing an MFA in Playwriting at UC San Diego under the mentorship of Naomi Iizuka and Deborah Stein. She is represented by Jamie Kaye-Phillips at Paradigm and Benjamin Blake and Anthony Ippolito at Heroes and Villains Entertainment.

## Setting

The village of Mt. Vernon, Ohio, which surrounds Whitford College, a small liberal arts college for the slightly more alternative and less together sons and daughters of American privilege. Rolling hills, fields of corn, Wal-Marts, Nazarene churches, diners, low brick buildings, white front porches, meth, heroin, negative space, red barns, and the woods.

Source: *Fires, Ohio*

## Characters: From *Uncle Vanya* to *Fires, Ohio*

*Fires, Ohio* is a modern adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. Below is the breakdown of how the classic characters translate to this modern setting.

<b><i>Uncle Vanya</i> Character</b>	<b><i>Fires, Ohio</i> Character</b>	<b>Shared Traits/Goals</b>
Alexander Serebekoff	Professor	An aging academic; feels his relevance slipping away.
Helena	Elena	The beautiful, much younger second wife; feels trapped.
Sonia	Sonia	The hard-working daughter; pining for unrequited love.
Ivan "Vanya" Voitski	John	Filled with regret over lost time and wasted potential.
Michael Astroff	Erin	The disillusioned professional (Doctor in <i>Vanya</i> / Environmentalist in <i>Fires</i> ).

# Vocabulary

## General Vocab

Word	Part of Speech	Meaning	Example
Accolades	Noun	strong praise, recognition of achievement	PROFESSOR (14) I think this deserves a toast: to my oldest friend's oldest daughter—to her visiting Whitford, to her talk, to her many accolades, and to a long, long future of continuing to make him the proudest father in the world.
Asbestos	Noun	Is a naturally occurring fibrous mineral that was used in construction and other products for its heat- and fire-resistant properties	PROFESSOR (10) ...And to think of what's burning—to think of the toxins— Battery acid and lead and asbestos.
Au courant	French Noun	having knowledge or understanding of something, or being conscious and informed about something	PROFESSOR (9) —of course I see the appeal, you know, for the students. Nihilism is very au courant for their generation.
Calvacade	Noun	any noteworthy series, as of events or activities	PROFESSOR (13) ...Never get older, Erin, whatever you do. It's a cavalcade of endless humiliations.
Curdled	Verb	separate or cause to separate into curds or lumps; spoiled.	Elena (84) He did NOT used to be like this. You knew him! It's like he's curdled
Epiglottis	Noun	a thin plate of flexible cartilage in front of the glottis that folds back over and protects the glottis during swallowing	PROFESSOR (10) Nonono, sit, you're our guest. Aren't you feeling the smoke? You must be. In the back of the throat. Right in the epiglottis.
Invalid	Noun	a person who is too sick or weak to take care of their own needs	PROFESSOR (13) No thank you, I'll get it, Sonia, I'm not an invalid. Just give me a second.

Muckraker	Noun	a person who searches for and tries to expose real or alleged corruption, scandal, or other wrongdoing, especially in politics.	PROFESSOR (9) The journalistic wunderkind, the muckraker! The toast of campus!
Perspicacious	Adjective	having a ready insight into and understanding of things.	PROFESSOR (73) Kind of what. Insightful? Inspiring? Perspicacious?
Rigamarole	Noun	a long drawn out conversation	PROFESSOR (97) I think last night's little rigamarole made that very clear.
Salient	Noun	Most noticeable or important	PROFESSOR (97) But the most salient point of all, really, is that you will not be moving with us.
Skulking	Verb	keeping out of sight, typically with a sinister or cowardly motive.	JOHN(66) beautiful Elena, glamorous Elena, skulking around the house collapsing on couches all day long...
Wunderkind	Noun	A child prodigy;one who succeeds in a competitive or highly difficult field or profession at an early age	PROFESSOR (9) The journalistic wunderkind, the muckraker! The toast of campus!

## Politics & Philosophy

WORD	PART OF SPEECH	MEANING	EXAMPLE
Altruism	Noun	Selfless concern for the well-being of others	ELENA (26) Well I mean that's the thing with all altruism, right, is that we really only do good things because it makes us feel better?

Existential static	Noun	A feeling of being overwhelmed	ERIN (89) I think something in my brain that's buzzing all the time, some, like, existential static, or refrigerator hum just goes quiet, for pretty much the only time.
Leftist	Noun	A person who has Left-Wise political views.	JOHN (30) I never thought I'd actually post on here and to be honest I feel pretty weird about it as a leftist, but I've been really struggling and I've observed the results some of you are getting, so...
Marx	Noun	a 19th century philosopher and economist who developed theories of capitalism and class struggle	JOHN (26) That's actually Marx.
Nihilism	Noun	The rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless.	PROFESSOR (9) —of course I see the appeal, you know, for the students. Nihilism is very au courant for their generation.
Optimist	Noun	A person who tends to be hopeful and confident about the future.	PROFESSOR (25) To Americans? You are an optimist.
Radical	Adjective	relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something	ERIN (10) Right—well—yeah, I don't think of it as nihilism, I think it's more like radical acceptance. Like, only when you accept reality as it actually is can you make a meaningful change,
Revolution	Noun	An instance of revolving.	JOHN (26) Violence is the birth pangs of the revolution.
Working class	Adjective	People who depend on wages for their livelihood.	JOHN (35) Because God forbid I have a day job—! God forbid I'm a member of the working class—

## Literary Allusions

A **literary allusion** is a reference to a person, event, thing, or other text within a literary work.

Allusion	In Context	Description
References to characters from the <i>Harry Potter</i> book series (Hermione, Snape)	“This love will be the death of me, <b>Hermione</b> thought.... <b>Snape</b> turned to look at her—glower at her—his dark eyes flashing.” (page 5)	This is Sonia’s fan fiction, and her fantasy interpretation of Hermione and Snape’s relationship in the book series <i>Harry Potter</i>
The song “Firework” by Katy Perry	<i>We hear “Firework” by Katy Perry start to faintly, tinnily play through the speaker on Sonia’s phone.</i> (page 6)	The song “Firework” by Katy Perry is a pop song released in the year 2010. The song uses fireworks as a metaphor for letting your inner light show and let go of feelings of inadequacies or insecurity.
Mark Bittman, food journalist and author	“It’s a <b>Mark Bittman</b> recipe.” (page 17)	Sonia says that she got the recipe from a Mark Bittman cookbook.
William Shakespeare’s play <i>Hamlet</i>	“There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance; pray you, love, remember.” (page 20)	“There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember” is a famous line from Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i> , spoken by Ophelia, symbolizing remembrance and love.
Fresh Air, a radio program produced by NPR	“I don’t think she needs one, my love, she’s been everywhere! <b>Fresh Air</b> , and the Times...” (page 21)	Fresh Air was most likely used because it’s a popular radio show and podcast that has won several awards. Elena is currently saying how accomplished Erin is so an established radio show would help prove that fact.
<i>The Divine Comedy</i> by Dante Alighieri	“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!” (page 24)	This quote is from <i>Dante’s Inferno</i> , written as a warning to those about to pass into the city of eternal suffering. This was quoted by the professor and possibly a foreshadowing of the internal wreck that is the house that these people are stuck in.
Thomas Pynchon, American novelist	“Holding court like he’s <b>Thomas Pynchon</b> —”(page 34)	John alludes to Thomas Pynchon because he believes his father is acting like an author much more revered than is realistic.
Brene Brown, American academic, researcher, and storyteller	“But in this case I’m glad of it, because all that beauty and goodness you see in other people comes right from you. God. I sound like <b>Brene Brown</b> .” (page 49)	Brene Brown is a mental health advocate who is known for women-forward professional self-help.

Diane Sawyer, American television broadcast journalist	"Iiii think I've answered quite enough questions about my love life, <b>Diane Sawyer.</b> " (page 55)	Diane Sawyer is known for intense questioning in her interviews.
Tony Soprano, fictional character from the TV series "The Sopranos"	"You want me to lean on them like I'm <b>Tony Soprano</b> , throw my weight around, so to speak, so that they're nicer to you?" (page 74)	Tony Soprano is a fictional mob boss who would threaten people to get what he wanted.
Henry Miller, American novelist and short story writer	"The world isn't nice! Do you think <b>Henry Miller</b> was nice?" (page 74)	This illusion was made to say that not knowing him you would assume he isn't nice.
Philip Roth, American novelist and short story writer	"Do you think <b>Philip Roth</b> was nice?" (page 74)	Philip Roth had a long-standing public reputation for being difficult, prickly, or abrasive but he was very smart and many would have loved the opportunity to learn from him. The professor makes this allusion to tell Sonia that although all people are not nice but there are people who you need to learn from.
"Death drive", psychoanalytic concept by Sigmund Freud	"I do, Sohn, I'm sorry. <b>Death drive.</b> " (page 78)	Erin makes the allusion relating her smoking to a "death drive" because smoking cigarettes is something that hurts your health. Ultimately, a death drive is an unconscious drive toward destruction.



Photo by: Casey Gardner Ford

# Student Work: Wildfire Research on Humanity

Students were tasked with describing the effects that wildfires have on human society from the personal to the environmental. The threat of a looming wildfire plays a large presence in the context of the play. This information is to help provide better context into the realities (and tragedies) that come from a wildfire disaster.

## The Human Body in Crisis (The Actor)



## Symptoms of Smoke Inhalation

Hoarseness	Shortness of breath	Chest pain	Sore throat	Cough	Wheezing
Stridor	Headache	Dizziness	Confusion	Fainting	Seizures

## How the Body Reacts to Extreme Heat

- Why fire is stressful: Heat is a stressor. During a fire your body produces an excess amount of cortisol which is the primary stress hormone.
- Why you would feel tired: As you become dehydrated your body temperature rises and your mood declines and cognitive function decreases.
- How it would affect everyday life: Being woken up by a fire can in turn affect the body's ability to cool down. This can have temporary and/or long-lasting effects on the mind leading to anxiety, insomnia, and depression.
- Signs of heat related mental disturbance: Irrational agitation, Sudden fatigue and or lack of motivation, headaches, sadness or anxiety.
- As the body heats up, blood vessels open causing the heart to work faster to pump blood throughout the body. This can result in mild symptoms such as heat rash or swollen feet.

## The Psychological Impact of Evacuating a Home

It is common for people to experience several stages of adjustment including shock, anger, depression, and hopelessness. Ultimately, however, people can reach a stage of acceptance and become able to move beyond disbelief, bitterness, and sadness. Positive feelings can begin to re-emerge as the focus shifts towards the future. Safety, security, and comfort are regained, and life moves toward the future. Long term effects include elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The trauma is compounded by the loss of a sense of security, routine, and identity that the home provides.

## Air Quality Index

The Air Quality Index (AQI) is a tool that measures air pollution levels to indicate how safe the air is to breathe, with higher numbers and corresponding colors like red or purple indicating poorer air quality.

The AQI in *Fires, Ohio* is 150. This means that the air is dangerous for sensitive groups meaning that people with major prior medical conditions should not breathe that air but it is fine for the general public.

Sources: <https://www.airnow.gov/aqi/aqi-basics/>



Photo by: Casey Gardner Ford

## Discussion Questions

- In *Fires, Ohio*, Erin's family is evacuating from a wildfire and she is calling to check on them. If you found yourself in need of help, who is the first person you would call and why?
- What do you think the fire could be symbolic of in the play?
- What is an example of climate change you've heard about in the news?
  - o Do you think we individually can have an impact with climate change?
- How could a designer utilize costumes, lighting, and set design to keep the threat of fire ever-present in a production of *Fires, Ohio*?

## Student Work – Journal Prompt – “Prized Possessions”

Assign a writing assignment to your students, “Prized Possessions.” Have students choose their top 5 prized possessions. What do they choose and why? Add an additional challenge by tasking students to write about the 5 non-electronic items they would choose.

### Example of student work from Stilwell School of the Arts:

If I had to leave quickly because of a wildfire, I would pack a go-bag with things I need and things that bring comfort. I would take water, snacks, a portable charger, clothes, my iPad, medications and inhaler, hygiene items, bonnet, fire blanket, AirPods, a book, my beaver plush, mangos, chocolate musk, my Owala bottle, and my PS5. This shows how fires affect real people, you have to choose what is most important to carry with you.

## Student Work - Lighting Design

Assign students to create a lighting design for *Fires, Ohio* as a group project. Students should be able to mesh the sequence of events in the script to specific lighting choices.

Students can explore:

- Color: What colors best match the mood or tone of the scene? Why?
- Color Temperature: Are the colors chosen warm or cool, and why?
- Intensity: how bright or dark are the lights?
- Focus: Are the lights a general wash or are certain parts of the stage in focus?
- Shadow: How shadowed is the set or characters? Why?

Students can create PowerPoints, Canva presentations, or Word documents with images from the internet to describe their lighting designs. The presentation should include specific lighting choices as well as the justification for those choices.

Example of student work from Stilwell School of the Arts:

<h1 style="text-align: center;">Fires, Ohio Lighting Design</h1> <p style="text-align: center;">Created by: Jaliyah M, Ally C, Isabella O, KJ H</p>	<h2 style="text-align: center;">SCENE 1</h2> <p>The main purpose of the lighting is to reflect the interconnected turmoil within and between the characters.</p> <p>Our evidence for how this would occur is how the lights will be utilized to create an atmosphere that reflects the characters emotions and the tensions of the story .</p> <p>The lighting is meant to increase in warmth as the play goes.</p> 
<h2 style="text-align: center;">SCENE 2-3</h2> 	<h2 style="text-align: center;">SCENE 4</h2> <p>Purple for the start of the scene because it is a night scene. Orange-yellow for when they start talking seriously.</p> 
<h2 style="text-align: center;">SCENES 5-9</h2> 	<h2 style="text-align: center;">SCENE 10</h2> 



Lighting Design in *Fires, Ohio* by Robert J. Aguilar // Photo by Casey Gardner Ford

## Student Work - Character Design

Assign students to create a character design for *Fires, Ohio* as a group project. Students should be able to mesh the character descriptions and actions in the play to specific costuming choices.

Students can explore:

- Style of clothing
- Color choices
- Fabric choices
- Accessories
- Hair styles
- Make-up styles

Students can create PowerPoints, Canva presentations, or Word documents with images from the internet to describe their character designs. The presentation should include specific costume/hair/make-up choices as well as the justification for those choices.

### Scenic and Costume Design for *Fires, Ohio* by Lex Liang



Photo by Casey Gardner Ford

Example of student work from Stilwell School of the Arts:

# ***Fires, Ohio Costume Design***

By: *Averie, Jada, Taylor, Christany, Aniyah*

Sonia



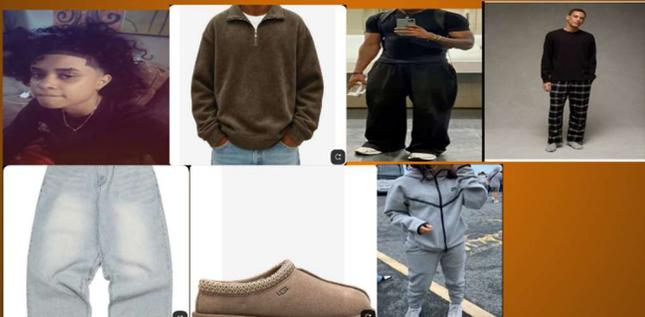
Elena



JOHN



ERIN



Professor



## Additional Student Work - Character Playlist

Assign students a character from *Fires, Ohio* and have them build that character's playlist throughout the show. Why did they choose the songs? When would each song play for the character throughout the production?

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