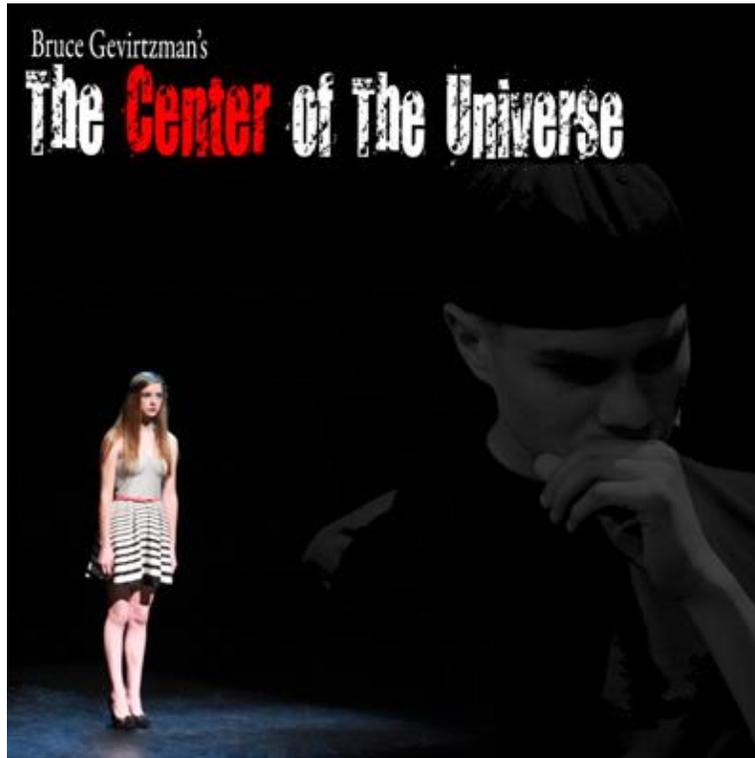




Steve Cisneros, Producing Artistic Director



Study Guide

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Contents

1. **Introduction** - Dear Educator
2. **Before the Show** (*Please read before the performance*)
- 3-4. **Back in the Classroom**- Discussion Topics / Critical Thinking
5. **Research Assignment**- The Power of One
6. **Writing Assignment I /Acting Improvisation** – “...it continues to revolve without me”
7. **Writing Assignment II** – Letter to Phantom Projects

Dear Educator,

We are pleased that your school has elected to experience one of Phantom Projects Theatre Group's youth events. The assembly you will see with your students will begin with a performance of *The Center of the Universe*, a play that focuses on prejudice, the value of human life, and the root of violence in today's society. Immediately following the play portion of the assembly, Phantom Projects will facilitate a discussion between your students and the cast of *The Center of the Universe*. We will talk about the show, our own experiences with prejudice, and other related topics that your students may raise. Many times the open-forum discussion must end before there is time to address each student's question or comment. The following study guide is designed to assist you, the educator, seize the opportunity to discuss such an important topic with your students while they are ready to listen.

We encourage you to take time to review the contents of this study guide before viewing *The Center of the Universe*. Please take time to discuss page 2- BEFORE THE SHOW with your class prior to the assembly. However, we ask that you wait until your students have seen the show to discuss the rest of the study guide's contents with them. This should increase the effectiveness of our entire program.

Thank you for allowing us to be part of your curriculum. Please feel free to contact us with any questions.

Sincerely,

Steve Cisneros
Artistic Director

BEFORE THE SHOW

It is very important that you take time to prepare your students for *The Center of the Universe* before the assembly begins. We suggest that you set aside ten to fifteen minutes of class time to do this. There are two major points that we would like you to cover.

1. FORMAT

The Center of the Universe consists of two parts.

First, Phantom Projects' young cast will present a theatrical performance about prejudice, tolerance, and the root of violence in our society. The play focuses on the value of human life by weaving stories from the past with current issues.

Immediately following, Phantom Projects will facilitate an open-forum discussion with your students about the play and its purpose. All of our young performers will take part in this exchange and they are eager to share their own personal stories with their peers in the audience. Please encourage your students to freely ask questions about the show or its subject matter during this part of the assembly; our cast and crew are excited to hear any questions and comments they may have.

2. THEATRE ETIQUETTE

Please discuss theatre etiquette with your students. The production they are about to see is a professional quality theatrical event aimed at a teen audience. Let your class know what kind of noise is appropriate during a performance. Examples of appropriate noise are applause between scenes or at the end of the show and laughing at humorous dialogue. Examples of inappropriate theatre noise are conversation, shouting out comments, and talking to the characters on stage during a scene. There should be no eating or drinking during the assembly. All cell phones and pagers should be turned off or left in the classroom.

The Center of the Universe utilizes slide cues to illustrate historical atrocities from the Holocaust to the terrorist attacks in Oklahoma and New York. The pictures are powerful; please prepare your students so that they can conduct themselves with maturity during the entire assembly.

Thank you very much for taking time to make sure that your students are ready to benefit from *The Center of the Universe* in the fullest.

BACK IN THE CLASSROOM

Some of the following questions can be used as written assignments or as discussion topics. We recommend that you begin with discussion and then, if you'd like, you can move on to written assignments. It is not necessary to use each and every one of these prompts. They are simply to be used as a guide to help promote constructive classroom discussion. Try to have several students answer the same question before moving on to the next one.

ASK YOUR STUDENTS TO THINK ABOUT THE MESSAGE OF *THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE*.

- ❖ What do you think the young actors were trying to communicate to you during the performance?
- ❖ Was the play effective? Why or why not?
- ❖ What surprised or impressed you about *The Center of the Universe*?
- ❖ Were the young actors believable in their roles?
- ❖ Were there any characters in the show that you related to? Why or why not?
- ❖ Are there any *other* topics that you would like to see a Phantom Projects play address?

A THEME IS AN IDEA, POINT OF VIEW, OR PERCEPTION EMBODIED AND EXPANDED UPON IN A WORK OF ART (LIKE A PAINTING OR A PLAY).

- ❖ What do you think the main theme of *The Center of the Universe* is?

Your students may have many different (and valid) answers, such as prejudice, violence and tolerance. If so, try to help them make the connection between their answers and Phantom Projects' answer: the value of human life.

A PERSON'S MENTALITY IS DEFINED AS THE CAST OR TURN OF THEIR MIND, THEIR MENTAL STATUS OR INCLINATION. CONSIDER THE MENTALITY OF DIFFERENT CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY: THE SLAVE OWNERS, THE KLAN MEMBER, THE GUY WITH A BAT, THE NAZI, AND THE ROBBER.

- ❖ Why is their mentality similar?
- ❖ What do you think those characters have in common besides the way they think?
- ❖ Have you observed people with similar mentalities in your life? Explain.

If your students have trouble answering these questions, you may refresh their memories with these lines from different scenes in *The Center of the Universe*.

ANTI-CONSCIENCE: ...how could you have a slave, *own* another human being if you thought they were as human as you are. The fact is, you couldn't. The fact is people treat other people a certain way mostly because they don't believe they're as human.

SLAVE MASTER: We have given him (slave) life. A life of value, a life of merit...

KLAN MEMBER: Only real Americans, those bred of White European blood, pure European blood, are deserving of the freedoms and liberties that our Christian God has bestowed upon this land...

NAZI: They were not real people as we were! They were Jews. They were not part of the master plan! And the others, they would make the master plan a failure! So they had to be exterminated.

CONSCIENCE: Like the slave owners, like the members of hate groups who practice racism today, like the nazis sixty years ago, for some, human life is cheap. There is no value to human life for them. And so even with the promise of a young woman like Maria, a single act of malice, one unthinking, uncaring, almost casual act of senselessness by a stranger, and the world is further diminished of its wealth and beauty.

HOW IMPORTANT IS A PERSON'S MENTALITY?

- ❖ If a person hates a different race or gender, etc. with a passion, but never shows his or her bigotry, is that person really a bigot? Why or why not?
- ❖ Is it possible to be passionate about something without ever expressing it in any part of your life?
- ❖ Can a person hold prejudiced beliefs without affecting anybody else? Why or why not?
- ❖ How do you think the Holocaust would have been different if most people had viewed each other as being equally important?
- ❖ What if Jews, Gypsies, and people with physical and mental disabilities were considered to be just as valuable as the Aryan ideal? Would the Holocaust have even existed?

"GREAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE SINCE THE DAYS OF SLAVERY AND OPRESSION. ACTS OF RACISM AND PREJUDICE ARE DIMINISHING AS THE HUMAN SPIRIT BEGINS TO SHINE THROUGH... Right? IT USED TO BE DIFFICULT FOR MANY PEOPLE TO PERCIEVE THE HUMANITY OF OTHERS. FORTUNATELY, IT'S MUCH BETTER NOW... Right? Right?"

The above is one of the CONSCIENCE'S lines from *The Center of the Universe*.

- ❖ Is the CONSCIENCE correct? Why or why not?
- ❖ Do you think slavery could flourish in American society today? Why or why not?
- ❖ Do you think our society could support a massive genocide like the holocaust that took place before and during WWII? Explain.
- ❖ Can you think of a time when your worth as a human being was overlooked? What happened? How did you feel? How did you react?
- ❖ What types of prejudice have you observed in your lifetime?

Thomas Jefferson made the following statement about race relations in 1781(*Notes on the State of Virginia*).

- ❖ Do you think he would be surprised with the state of our multi-cultural society today? Why or why not?

"Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinction which nature has made; and many

other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."

THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE TALKS ABOUT RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF OTHER PEOPLE'S LIVES. WHAT ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR OWN LIFE?

- ❖ Do you think that *your* life can make a difference in this world? Why or why not?
- ❖ Do you think that *your* words and/or actions are powerful enough to affect somebody else? Why or why not?
- ❖ If you could change one thing about the world we live in, what would it be and why?

RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

The Power of One

Your students may be familiar with several heroes who stood up for civil rights such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and The Little Rock Nine. Yet, it is still easy for students to feel that one person can not make a difference. This research assignment was created with that in mind. The goal of this exercise is to find out, through interviewing an inspirational person, that each one of us has the power to inspire others to improve our communities.

This assignment may be done by individual students or by small groups.

Have each student or small group select one person in their community. It might be a teacher, a parent, a local business owner, a school volunteer, or a city council member just to name a few ideas. Encourage your students to choose someone they look up to. Each student or group should conduct an interview with their selected community member. They may ask any questions that they think are important, but here are a few points to make sure they include:

- ❑ Subjects' name,
- ❑ Subject's job (or volunteer position)
- ❑ Students' reason for choosing this person

Make sure your students also include the following questions in their interviews:

- ❑ Talk about a time when one person made a difference (positive or negative) in your life.
- ❑ Who do you hope to influence with your life?
- ❑ What do you do to make a difference in this world?
- ❑ How do you handle it when someone says something negative about you?
- ❑ What was the most difficult thing you ever did?
- ❑ If you could go back in your life and change anything, what would it be? Why?
- ❑ What would you say to someone who thinks that one person can't make a difference?

After conducting the interview, each student (or small group) should use the information they have learned to create a written report or to prepare an oral presentation for the class. Encourage creativity in your student's presentations. Skits, audience participation, and visual aids, among other things will help to make the information your students receive from their fellow classmates memorable.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT I / ACTING IMPROVISATION

The following exercise was designed as an actor's improvisation, but can also be used as a writing assignment. Based on your classroom dynamic, please choose option one or option two.

For either option, your students will have to imagine walking in someone else's shoes.

MARIA: *The universe that was mine, no longer with its center, continues to revolve... without me.*

The sentence above is the last line of the play, *The Center of the Universe*. It is spoken by the main character of Maria and tells us that her story is over. But what happens, now? When Maria's life ended, she left behind the rest of her "universe". Her friends, her family, her hopes and dreams—everything that surrounded her while she lived. The people who thought they would share the rest of Maria's life with her are now left to live without her.

Option One - Writing Assignment I

Have your students put themselves into the shoes of a supporting character in the play. They may choose to be Maria's mother **Mrs. Alfari** or her boyfriend, **Craig**. Each student will write from his or her selected character's point of view. All papers should be written in the first person. Encourage your kids to be creative. They may choose to compose a *journal entry, poem, or letter*.

It will help to consider the **5W's**. These are tools actors use to help analyze the characters they play. Understanding your character brings reality to your performance. The same is true if you are writing in the first person as a character other than yourself. You might like to have your students answer the **5W's** on paper before they begin their composition.

The 5W's

Who: Who are you? What is your name? Your age? Your goals, dreams, likes and dislikes?

What: What are you feeling right now?

When: How much time has passed since Maria's tragic death?

Where: Where are you now?

Why: What do you hope to accomplish by putting your thoughts down in writing?

Option Two – Acting Improvisation

Many actors, including the teens in Phantom Projects use improvisation as an exercise to improve their acting skills. Improvisation helps actors understand and connect with the characters they are portraying. In a situation like this one, where we are dealing with realistic circumstances, it can also help us realize the genuine consequences of our own actions.

Here's how to start. Choose two volunteers from your class. Each student will play a different character from *The Center of the Universe*. Ask one of your volunteers to look at the situation through the eyes of the robber who killed Maria and Sparky. The other student will take on the role of **Maria's mother, Mrs. Alfari or Maria's boyfriend, Craig**.

Explain to the class what the two volunteers are going to do. Maria's mother or boyfriend is about to meet the robber who took Maria's life.

Let your class "set the stage" for the exchange that's about to take place. They can decide *where* the meeting between the two characters will take place and (*when*) how much time has passed since the shooting. Let them make suggestions as to what has happened in the two characters' lives since Maria's death. Your class should also decide *why* this meeting is taking place. Was the meeting by choice or by accident? Finally, your class should decide what they want this conversation to accomplish.

Let the two volunteers (actors) interact with each other as if they were actually two characters from *The Center of the Universe*. Encourage your actors to take a moment to "get into character". This means that they should take a little time to look at the situation through their characters' eyes, incorporating the class' suggestions. Each actor should decide how his or her character feels about this set of circumstances. Once the actors have reached the agreed upon conclusion, OR it is evident that they never will, the exercise is over. However, you may choose to use this exercise several times with different volunteers, different settings, and different outcomes.

Writing Assignment II

Phantom Projects wants to know what you thought about *The Center of the Universe*!

Phantom Projects Educational Theatre Group periodically makes changes to its assemblies to make sure each play remains relevant and effective. This evolution is made possible by the hard work of our young creative team, aided by comments from students, parents, and teachers alike who have attended Phantom Projects' educational programs.

Encourage your class to write letters to Phantom Projects Educational Theatre Group. Use the outline you normally use in class for letter writing. Have your students write a rough draft, make corrections and revisions, and then send us their final drafts.

Encourage your class to be honest.

We ask that each student give his or her true thoughts about the play, *The Center of the Universe*, and the discussion that followed.

We'd like to know if they relate to any characters in the play or any of the young actors who took part in the assembly.

We welcome your students' opinions about prejudice, tolerance, violence and respect for human life, and want to know how these themes affect their lives.

While we would like your students to correct and edit their letters for spelling and grammatical errors, we ask that they do not edit their opinions. Positive changes can be inspired if your class expresses their opinions about the assembly (positive or negative) freely.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Phantom Projects Theatre Group

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