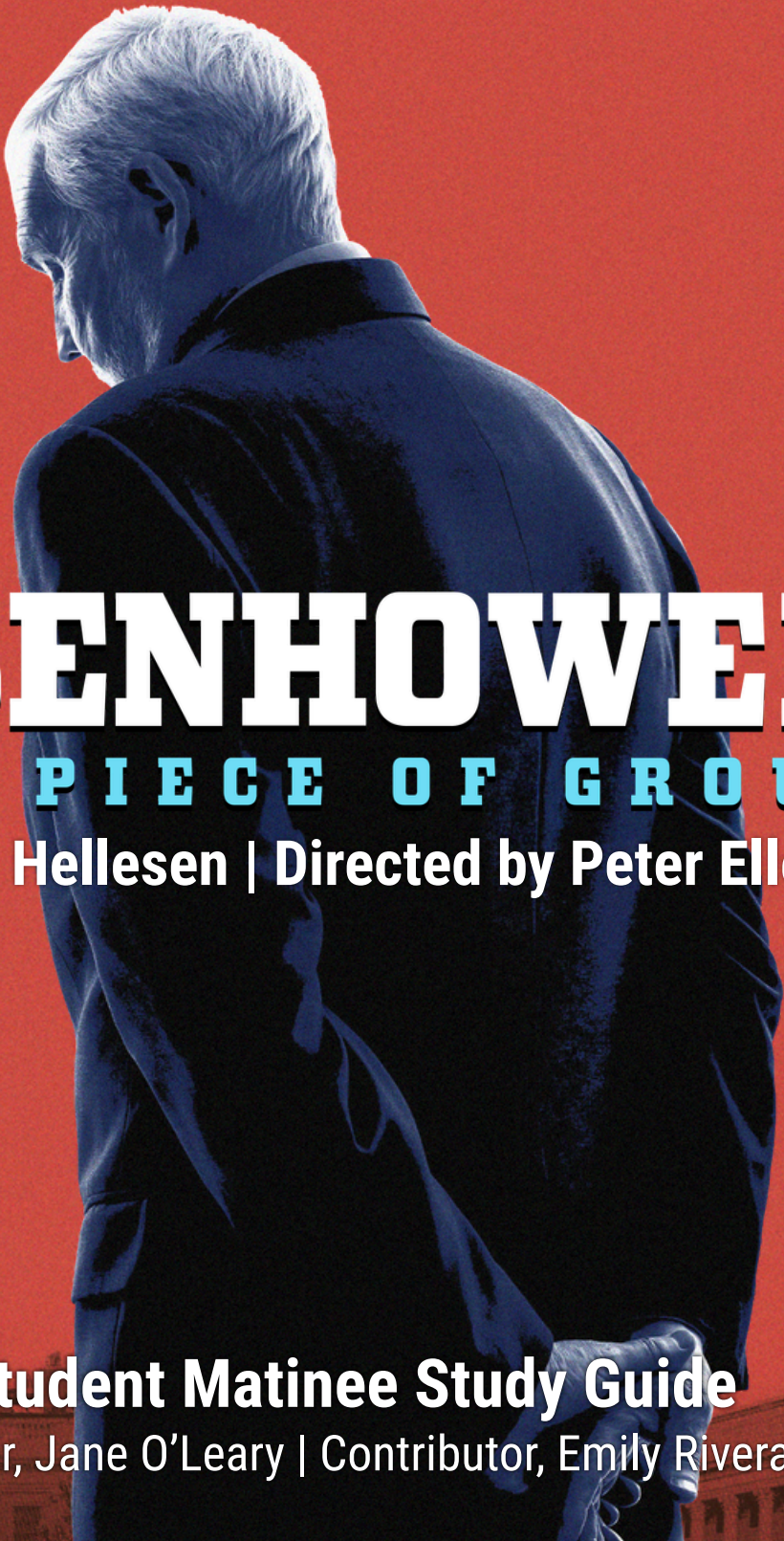


PLAYBILL®

BARRINGTON STAGE COMPANY



EISENHOWER:

THIS PIECE OF GROUND

By Richard Helleesen | Directed by Peter Ellenstein

Student Matinee Study Guide

Editor, Jane O'Leary | Contributor, Emily Rivera

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Searching for discussion questions? Look for the red speech bubbles. 

Preparing for the Performance

This guide is meant to be a practical educational resource for teachers to draw connections between the play and core curricular subjects being studied in the classroom. The guide contains background information on the play, as well as suggested activities to explore the play's key themes either before or after viewing the performance.

Teachers can use this guide to:

- Enhance student appreciation of the experience of live theatre.
- Introduce students to relevant cultural & historical topics that support classroom learning.
- Creatively draw connections to topics addressed in the play as they relate to core curriculum.
- Gather instructional tools, which can be used to plan lessons in alignment with national learning standards.

Before the Play

Share resources from this guide to provide context that may prove useful to their understanding of the historical context.

The Day of the Play

Please arrive 10-15 minutes before the performance to allow time before the show for students to use the restrooms, which are located in the theater lobby.

It is recommended that you assign one chaperone for every fifteen to twenty students, and ask your chaperones to disperse themselves amongst the student group to help support best behavior during the performance. Please let staff know which school you are from and the headcount so we can seat you appropriately.

After the Play

We will host talkbacks after the show. Please remain seated and prepare your questions for the cast.

Teachers may choose to lead one of the post-show lessons in this guide to help students draw connections to the curriculum.

Theatre Etiquette

We are so glad you are joining us for this important play. *Eisenhower: This Piece of Ground* has a runtime of 1 hour and 50 minutes, including a ten-minute intermission.

Theatre Etiquette (Continued)

Cell phones and movement or noise in the audience can be very disruptive to the performance. Please have a discussion about what is required from a respectful audience. We discourage anyone from leaving their seats except in case of emergency. If you leave the theater during the show, please see a member of BSC staff to be readmitted. Staff will inform you where and when to reenter.

Reminders the Day of the Performance

- Barrington Stage Staff are on-site to answer any questions you may have during the show; please let us know if there are any questions or access needs.
- There is no photography/videography allowed during the show.
- Please be seated promptly in your assigned seat.
- Remain in your seat for the entire performance.
- Pay attention to announcements made before the show about the theater's rules you are attending and the location of the fire exits.

EISENHOWER: THIS PIECE OF GROUND

It's 1962. [The New York Times publishes](#) a ranking of the greatest American Presidents. Pondering his placement on the list, Eisenhower looks back on his life of service and contemplates what it takes to lead, and what makes a leader great. Full of fascinating revelations about the man, the leader, and American history itself, this one-man play by Richard Hellesten lets you sit in with the five-star President.

About the Play

Eisenhower: This Piece of Ground demonstrates how theatre can illuminate history by focusing on the human being behind the headlines. Rather than presenting Dwight D. Eisenhower as a distant historical figure, Richard Hellesten invites audiences into a deeply personal conversation about service, leadership, and legacy. Drawing on Eisenhower's own writings while imagining his private reflections, the play asks viewers to consider what it truly means to lead with humility and principle.

The play also encourages students to think critically about civic life and the responsibilities of citizenship. Its central questions remain relevant across generations:

- What makes a great leader?
- How should history remember those who hold power?
- What responsibilities accompany leadership?
- How can integrity guide difficult decisions?

By blending biography, history, and dramatic storytelling, *Eisenhower: This Piece of Ground* reminds us that leadership is measured not only by accomplishments but also by character, service, and a commitment to the common good.

Theatrical Genre

Solo Performance

Hellesten writes *Eisenhower: This Piece of Ground* as a solo performance, also known as a solo show/one-person show. A single actor portrays Eisenhower as he recounts moments of his life to the editor of his biography. "Who the [heck] wants to relive my presidency?" In this way, the audience is a fly on the wall for Eisenhower's personal reflections.

The Historical Drama

Although Dwight D. Eisenhower is a historical figure, the play *Eisenhower: This Piece of Ground*, written by Richard Hellesten, is, in fact, fictitious. As Hellesten remarks, he has adapted much of the play from memoirs, speeches, and letters.

Act One opens with a recorded excerpt from the first Inaugural Address of Dwight D. Eisenhower, on Tuesday, JANUARY 20, 1953.

As excerpted by the playwright:

From Eisenhower's Inaugural Address:

"My friends, before I begin, would you permit me the privilege of uttering a little private prayer of my own....Give us the power to discern clearly right from wrong, and allow our words and actions

The Historical Drama (Continued)

to be governed thereby, and by the laws of this land....May cooperation be the mutual aim of those who, under our Constitution, hold to differing political faiths, so that all may work for the good of our beloved country. The strength of free people lies in unity; their danger, in discord....For this truth must be clear before us: whatever America hopes to bring to pass in the world must first come to pass in the heart of America."

Act Two opens with a voiceover of Eisenhower's farewell speech in January 1961.

As excerpted by the playwright:

"We now stand ten years past the midpoint of a century that has witnessed four major wars among great nations. And we realize that American leadership and prestige depend, not merely on our riches and our strength, but on how we use our power in the interests of world peace and human betterment.... Down the long lane of history yet to be written, this world of ours must avoid becoming a community of dreadful fear and hate, and be instead a proud confederation of mutual trust and respect."

Questions

1. The play is bookended by two important speeches by President Eisenhower. Why might the playwright have picked these two speeches?
2. Why do you feel he chose them to be played as a voiceover and not spoken by the actor onstage?
3. What do the excerpts of the speeches tell you about Richard Helleisen's point of view of the President?

Setting

The Eisenhower Farm, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was the only home owned by President Eisenhower and Mamie Eisenhower. The farm held sentimental value for Eisenhower, as he had been put in charge of Camp Colt during WWI in the same area as the farm.

Doud Dwight (Icky) Eisenhower celebrated his first birthday on the farm in Gettysburg before he tragically passed away at the age of three from scarlet fever. The setting is central to the storytelling, and the title even references the farm

In Act 1, Eisenhower references the farm:

"But for me, this place was sort of an experiment: with some hard work, and good agricultural principles, maybe I could do something with this piece of ground."

Setting (Continued)

Richard Helleesen describes the setting of the play in the following stage directions:

"The sun porch of the house at the Eisenhower farm, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The set should be more suggested than literal, an outline of the room that allows for real objects within and projections which can appear beyond; the actual room should be consulted for ideas. The porch is an enclosed outdoor patio--so, upstage is a "wall" containing windows and, up left, glass sliders. This meets a hint of the original white brick patio wall, which angles down to center left where there is an exit to the rest of the house. Low brown carpet is partially laid over a stone floor. All of this looks out on a brick terrace and an expanse of grass leading to the tree line which separates the farm from the Gettysburg battlefield. Up left, a table with a couple chairs; books and loose papers are on the table, as well as a telephone with a long cord. Nearby, a cabinet or bar which will contain coffee service, glassware, and a bottle of scotch. Center, in front of the windows, two stuffed chairs face out, with a small table between them; on this table is a low reel-to-reel tape recorder with external microphone. Down right, a cabinet television faces into the room; on it are family photos, a couple of books, and a small bust of Abraham Lincoln. Finally, somewhere on stage is an easel with oil paints and brushes nearby, a canvas facing away, and a folding chair. Other objects may be placed about--but no awards, military or political mementos. Though it is 1962, the style is 1950s: comfortable, homey. There is nothing "presidential".

This play is a fiction, set in a specific point in time, but it is adapted from a range of General Eisenhower's memoirs, speeches, and letters. I am grateful to David Eisenhower and the Eisenhower family for permission to quote as needed."

-Richard Helleesen

Question(s)

1. In what ways does the description of the place by Helleesen reflect his perspective of Eisenhower as a character?
2. How does the setting contribute to the theme of the play? Why do you suppose Helleesen chose that title?

Character List

Although *Eisenhower: This Piece of Ground* is a one-person play, there are several characters referenced during the play. Here is a partial list of important characters referenced.

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER (71): General of the Army and former President of the United States. Eisenhower is the only character physically present onstage. He wears slacks, a shirt, and a light cardigan.

MAMIE EISENHOWER: Eisenhower's wife and former First Lady. Although she never appears onstage, Mamie is a central presence throughout the play and in Eisenhower's memories and reflections.

KEVIN McCANN: Eisenhower's editor, who is working with him on his book. Eisenhower speaks with McCann on the telephone and records notes into a microphone for transcription to be sent to him.

EISENHOWER'S SONS: Eisenhower reflects on his role as a father and the demands his military and political careers placed on his family, especially the loss of his first son to scarlet fever.

- Doud Dwight "Icky" Eisenhower (1917-1921)
- John Sheldon Doud Eisenhower (1922-2013)

EISENHOWER'S PARENTS: Eisenhower reflects on his parents and upbringing in Abilene, Kansas, especially his mother, who was a pacifist.

- Father: David Jacob Eisenhower (1863-1942)
- Mother: Ida Elizabeth Stover Eisenhower (1862-1946)

JOHN AND DELORES MOANEY: Eisenhower's longtime valet and housekeeper who became very close to the Eisenhowers.

About the Production

Time & Place

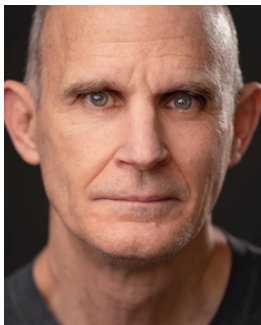
August 1962, The Eisenhower Farm, Gettysburg, PA

Act I: Late Morning • **Act II:** Early Afternoon

Cast

Dwight D. Eisenhower David Sitler

Meet the Cast



DAVID SITLER (Dwight D. Eisenhower) BSC Debut. David is thrilled to be making his debut here at Barrington Stage as the alternate Eisenhower, having played the role earlier this year at Florida Studio Theatre. He has family roots in Gettysburg and remembers stories about Ike being told, and is happy to return the favor and tell this story we need now more than ever. He has been on Broadway with Rosemary Harris in the Tony Award-winning *An Inspector Calls* and on tour with Stacy Keach in *Frost/Nixon*, as well as Regional Theatres from coast to coast in roles from Atticus to Scrooge in over 160 productions and many NYC Theatre companies. He has over 40 film and TV credits with a few more in the can, and the game *Red Dead Redemption 2*, as well as music videos with Ben Platt and Charlie Puth. Thanks to Peter, Richard, John, wife/Actor Carolyn Popp and BWA. More info at www.davidsitler.com.

Creative Team

RICHARD HELLESEN (Playwright) is the author of numerous plays and musicals for adult and young audiences. His work has been seen at the Denver Center, South Coast Repertory, Los Angeles Repertory Company, Sacramento Theatre Company, Geva, Florida Stage, Gretna Theatre, Sundance Children's Theatre, Imagination Stage, People's Light & Theatre, City Theatre in Miami, B Street Theatre and Ford's Theatre in Washington D.C., where he is an associate artist. He has received playwriting awards from the National Theatre Conference, the Beverly Hills Theatre Guild, the Philadelphia Festival Theatre for New Plays and PEN USAWest; his two-dozen short plays include five finalists for the Actors Theatre of Louisville Heideman Award. A member of the Dramatists Guild, he has twice been playwright-in-residence at the William Inge Center for the Arts in Kansas.

Creative Team (Continued)

PETER ELLENSTEIN (Director + Producer) is producing artistic director of the New Los Angeles Repertory Company. He is a multi-award-winning director, producer, new play midwife and educator, whose work has been seen all over the country. For 13 years, Peter was artistic director of the William Inge Center for the Arts in Kansas where he worked with many of America's finest playwrights and artists, served seven years as producing director of the original Los Angeles Repertory Company, for whom he directed the L.A. premiere of *Assassins*, *Odets' Rocket to the Moon* and many other acclaimed productions. He was interim artistic director of both the Gretna Theatre in Pennsylvania and the Jerry Herman Ring Theatre at the University of Miami in Florida. Peter is a member of the Directors' Unit of the Actors' Studio West and has a decades-long artistic relationship with Richard Helleesen and has directed the premieres of many of Richard Helleesen's plays.

MICHAEL DEEGAN (Scenic + Lighting Design) has designed scenery, lighting, and projections since 1970. His focus has been on opera, starting in Boston, where he worked with Esquire Jauchem. He was recruited by the Metropolitan Opera in 1977, moved to New York City, married, and started collaborating with costume and set designer Sarah G. Conly. Notable Off-Broadway productions were *Flight*, *Dante's Inferno*, and *Angel of the Amazon*. *A Streetcar Named Desire* for Andre Previn in Pittsburgh. *The New York Times* picked their production of *Pique Dame* as a top ten production of 1991. Won an Emmy for *Bernstein at Seventy*. On Broadway: designed the lighting for *The Circle* and *Shadowlands*. International designs for Philip Glass' *La Belle la Bete* and *Dracula*. They have designed scenery, lighting and costumes for opera productions in Iceland, Italy, Japan and China.

SARAH G. CONLY (Costume Consultant) is in the process of winding down a 50-year career as a designer of costumes and (with partner Michael Deegan) scenery for opera, television and stage. Working primarily in opera, she has created productions for companies all over the United States and the world including in China, Japan, Korea, Italy and Iceland as well as in the middle of the Pacific Ocean on a Theatre at Sea cruise from Sydney to Hong Kong. She is happy to be temporarily suspending her retirement plans to serve as a design consultant on *This Piece of Ground*.

JOE HUPPERT (he/him) (Projection + Sound Design) created the original designs for Ike in Los Angeles. Previous projection designs include *This Wonderful Life* for North Coast Rep, American Blues and other venues; *The Dybbuk* and *The Oldest Boy* (Craig Noel Award) for San Diego Repertory Theater; *Lizard Boy* for Diversionary Theater; *The Elephant Man* for Backyard Renaissance; and *Glengarry Glen Ross* for La Jolla Playhouse. Sound designs include *Blueprints to Freedom* and *Peter and the Starcatchers* (La Jolla Playhouse); *The Fantasticks* and *Stop Kiss* (Pasadena Playhouse); *Scott Joplin's Rag*, *Extraordinary Chambers* (Craig Noel nomination) (Mo'Olelo); *Wisdom From Everything* (Local Theater Company); *Urinetown*, *Over the Tavern*, *King O' the Moon* (Mercury Theater).

Creative Team (Continued)

KAREN L. CARPENTER (Production Supervisor) was the PSM of August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson* and *Two Trains Running*, for their regional and Broadway premieres. Other Broadway PSM credits include *Sunset Boulevard* and her personal favorite, *Les Misérables*. Also, Yale Rep, The Old Globe, CTG, La Jolla Playhouse, Seattle Rep, Center Stage, The Huntington, WTF, and Arena Stage. Karen chaired the MFA stage management program for Yale Drama; her alumni now lead master's programs across the country. In her other life, she is a highly regarded director with several new projects in the works. She happily revisits her first career to support Peter, Esquire, and John in this wonderful endeavor.

McCORKLE CASTING LTD. (Season Casting) McCorkle Casting continues to strive for inclusivity and social awareness during its 35-year history in casting and is pleased to have been associated with Barrington Stage Company for over 20 years. Broadway: Over 50 productions including, *On the Town*, *Amazing Grace*, *End of the Rainbow*, *A Few Good Men*, etc. Off-Broadway: Over 60 productions: *Highlights*, *Tribes*, *Our Town*, *Driving Miss Daisy*. Regional Theatre: Guthrie, CATF, City Theatre-Pittsburgh, George Street Playhouse, and hundreds more regional theatre productions across the country. Feature films: Currently casting six films for theatrical release. Previous project highlights: *Premium Rush*, *Ghost Town*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *Die Hard with a Vengeance*, etc. Television: *The Amazons*, 3 films for Hallmark, *Twisted*, *Humans* for *Sesame Street*, *Californication* (Emmy Nomination), *Chappelle's Show*, *Strangers with Candy*, etc. mccorklecasting.com

Before You Watch

Think about:

- What qualities make someone a great leader?
- Should history judge leaders based on intentions or outcomes?
- How should leaders respond to criticism?
- Is it possible to please everyone?

Consider sharing the following timelines to provide historical context:

[Dwight D. Eisenhower Chronology](#) | [Dwight D. Eisenhower Society](#)
[Dwight D. Eisenhower Event Timeline](#) | [The American Presidency Project](#)

While You Watch

Pay attention to:

- Moments when Eisenhower questions himself
- Stories that reveal his values
- References to historical events
- How humor balances serious moments
- The relationship between public image and private reflection

After You Watch

Discussion Questions

- Why does the playwright begin with Eisenhower reading his presidential ranking?
- How does the play define leadership?
- Which decisions in Eisenhower's life seem most difficult?
- What surprised you about Eisenhower as a person?
- How does the play distinguish between popularity and greatness?
- What responsibilities do citizens have in a democracy?
- Why do you think historical figures continue to be debated?
- What leadership lessons apply to today's world?

Creative Writing Prompts

1. Presidential Reflection

- Imagine you are a former president looking back on your years in office.
- What accomplishments are you most proud of?
- What would you do differently?

2. Defining Leadership

Write an essay answering:

- What qualities make someone an effective leader?
- Support your ideas with examples from history, literature, or your own experiences.

3. History's Verdict

- Choose a historical figure.
- Write a speech defending their legacy against criticism.

4. Letter to a Future Leader

- Write a letter offering advice to someone who hopes to become president, governor, mayor, or another public servant.

Reviews

Eisenhower, This Piece of Ground: Doing Justice to the 34th President

REVIEW: At Barrington Stage, John Rubinstein channels a fiery Eisenhower in a gripping solo play.

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