

# SHAW 19 FESTIVAL

## Rope Study Guide Text

The Shaw Festival presents...

**Rope** by Patrick Hamilton

Directed by Jani Lauzon

Designed by Joanna Yu

Lighting designed by Louise Guinand

Original music and sound designed by John Gzowski

Production Sponsor PriceWaterhouseCoopers

Two college students in 1920s London commit murder...

They host a party for the victim's friends and family – with his body hidden in a chest as the evening's centerpiece – just to see if they can get away with it.

Will the body be discovered? Can they hold their nerve? Will justice be served?

### **The Story**

Wyndham Brandon and Charles Granillo are two young students at Oxford University. As the play begins, we learn that they have murdered their friend and fellow classmate, Ronald Kentley, and hidden his body in a locked chest in the sitting room of Brandon's residence.

They have invited the family and friends of the victim to come for dinner, just to prove that they can get away with murder.

As the evening proceeds, Brandon and Granillo's plans for a perfect murder begin to unwind...will their "immaculate deed" go undetected?

### **The World of the Play**

Brandon and Granillo are students at the University of Oxford in England. At that time, university students were predominantly wealthy and from the upper classes of society. Most of the students came from extremely privileged backgrounds, and many did not need to work to support themselves – they were financed by their wealthy families.

Unlike today, where students attend university in order to gain specialized knowledge for the workforce, university at this time was seen as a way to teach people to think, reason, and debate. This idea of higher education had been around since the Greeks!

As university students, Brandon and Granillo would have been exposed to many different ideas and schools of thought, including those of popular psychologists at the time, such as Freud, Jung and Nietzsche.

The title of the play actually comes from Nietzsche's book, Thus Spake Zarathustra: "Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman - a rope over an abyss."

Wondering what Nietzsche means by "Superman?" Check out this video clip: [Video – The School of Life: Nietzsche on Superman <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxiKqA-u8y4>]

In addition, while you are watching our play, think about all of the sayings we have about ropes – and how they might apply to this story.

Many of the theories and philosophies of 20<sup>th</sup> Century thinkers, such as Nihilism, emerged out of, and developed because of, the social and political upheaval of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and especially the horror of the First World War. The emptiness and purposelessness that people felt after witnessing so much death and destruction led to a sense of futility and meaninglessness.

Nihilism comes up a lot in the themes of the play. Existential nihilism argues that life is without objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value. This belief is referenced several times in the play's dialogue – especially between Brandon and Granillo and their former teacher, Rupert Cadell. Watch for how the main characters discuss these ideas throughout the play, and use them to justify (or refute) the behaviour of the killers.

### **The Playwright**

Patrick Hamilton was born in Sussex, England in 1904. His parents were writers, but due to his father's alcoholism and financial mismanagement, his family spent much of his youth in boarding houses. As they moved around a lot, Hamilton's formal education was sporadic, and ended officially at the age of 15, when he was pulled out of school by his parents.

Despite his lack of formal education or training, Hamilton displayed an early talent for writing, publishing his first poem in 1919. After a brief career as an actor, Hamilton moved to writing novels, and then plays.

Hamilton was very interested in ideas of power and position in society. He became interested in the philosophies of Karl Marx and was for a time a Marxist, although he never formally joined the Communist Party. He was fascinated with theatrical melodrama, and he incorporated some of his interest in the macabre in his writing. Many of his novels feature dystopian themes and explore disillusionment with capitalist culture.

Hamilton also disliked many aspects of modern life, and was distressed by the rise of Fascism in Europe. He suffered from Depression, and began drinking to deal with the symptoms of his illness. He died from cirrhosis of the liver and kidney failure in 1962, at the age of 58.

Although he did not care much for popular culture, two of Hamilton's plays, *Gaslight* and *Rope*, became wildly successful and made their author wealthy. Both *Gaslight* and *Rope* were turned into popular films in both Britain and the United States.

*Rope*'s first production for the screen was actually an experimental live broadcast by the BBC in 1939. Hamilton adapted the script of his play for this production, which is said to have inspired Alfred Hitchcock to attempt a feature film version of *Rope*. This film was produced and released in 1948, although it was adapted for the screen without Patrick Hamilton – the screen adaptation was done by a Canadian actor named Hume Cronyn.

[Video – *Rope* trailer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xkQoH8QbVs>]

Hitchcock's film version of the story is significantly changed from the play – featuring different settings, characters and a modified ending.

In 1983, the play was once again dramatized for the BBC, featuring Alan Rickman (aka *Harry Potter*'s Professor Snape) in the role of the teacher, Rupert Cadell.

### **The History...based on a true story!**

It is thought that Patrick Hamilton loosely based his play on a true story. In May of 1924, two wealthy students from the University of Chicago kidnapped and murdered 14-year-old Bobby Franks as a way to prove their perceived intellectual superiority. It was claimed that Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, who were both bright students, had been influenced by Nietzsche's concept of the superman – that they possessed extraordinary and unusual capabilities, and that their superior intellects allowed them to rise above laws and societal rules that bound "normal" people.

Some really interesting questions of morality arose during the course of the real-life trial, as well as through the action of the play. In the 1920s, the death penalty was still an accepted form of punishment in both England and the United States. At that time, the punishment for murder was death by hanging.

In the real-life case of Leopold and Loeb, the defense lawyer was against the death penalty, and argued that the boys were not truly responsible for their actions, as they had lived through the First World War and had been taught that killing was acceptable. The defense was successful, and Leopold and Loeb were both sentenced to life in prison.

One of the conversations that the characters in *Rope* have is about what constitutes a crime – one person killing another is murder, but an entire generation killing each other in war, as happened in WWI, is deemed acceptable by society.

## **Design**

In the play, Brandon's residence, where the murder and dinner party occur, is located in Mayfair – an affluent area of London. In the 1920s, it was home to many wealthy families, as well as foreign embassies, exclusive shops, restaurants, clubs and galleries. It is assumed in our production that Brandon has inherited his home from an older, wealthy relative, so the décor is a mix of both an older style, and his personal touches.

Our director, Jani Lauzon, and designer, Joanna Yu, have purposely created a setting that forces the action downstage and towards the audience. This setting places the audience in the space with the actors, and puts them right in the centre of the action of the story.

Nothing in the set is square – there are nooks and crannies everywhere, and the use of transparencies and shadows creates a sense of private vs. public space – what is said out in open may not be the real intent, and there is always another side to the story. The creative team wanted to explore the idea that “if walls could talk, how would they tell this story?”

Another interesting element of the storytelling in this production is the use of time. In most murder mysteries, the tension comes from the “who-done-it.” However, in *Rope*, the entire murder and the murderers are revealed in the very first scene. The tension in this play comes from the fact that the action is taking place in “real time” – and we are drawn in to the story because we want to know if the murderers are going to be caught. Note the references the characters make to time, and how the set and blocking add to our awareness of time passing in the plot.

The costumes in our production are designed to reveal something about each of the characters. As you meet each one, consider what their clothing says about them. For example, what does it say about the murderer Brandon, that he wears an off-white suit to commit his crime?

Finally, when you see our production, take note of the lighting and sound design. How does lighting (or lack thereof) help to create tension? What does the sound and music add to the depth of the relationships portrayed on stage?

So what do you think? Will the body be discovered? Will the murderers be caught? We look forward to seeing you soon at the Shaw Festival to find out!

<https://www.shawfest.com/beyond-the-stage/teachers/#teachers-resources>