



Damn Yankees Study Guide Text

The Shaw Festival Presents...

Damn Yankees

Words and Music by RICHARD ADLER and JERRY ROSS

Book by GEORGE ABBOTT and DOUGLASS WALLOP

Based on the novel by Douglass Wallop "The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant"

Directed by Brian Hill

Music direction by Paul Sportelli

Choreographed by Allison Plamondon

Set and costumes designed by Cory Sincennes

Lighting designed by Mikael Kangas

Sound designed by John Lott

Magic and illusions designed by Skylar Fox

The Story

Joe Boyd is a middle-aged real estate agent who is a fan of the Washington Senators, a passionate but losing baseball team. Joe is married to Meg – they love each other, but Joe is having a mid-life crisis. One night, after the Senators lose yet another baseball game, Joe says he'd sell his soul for one long distance hitter to help his beloved team.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the smooth-talking Mr. Applegate appears and offers Joe an irresistible choice – the opportunity to transform into the young Joe Hardy, the long ball hitter who can save the Washington Senators. Unable to resist, Joe agrees, even though he will have to leave his wife and home. Being a real estate agent, Joe insists on an escape clause – if he plays in the last game of the season, he'll remain Joe Hardy forever, but if he wants to leave and return to his old life, he has until 9 o'clock the night before the pennant game to walk away.

After leaving a goodbye letter to Meg, the now-young Joe is taken to the Senator's ballpark by Mr. Applegate, where Joe is "discovered" and joins the team. The young Joe's new skills allow the team to start winning, and they begin to move up in the standings - much to the delight of the team and their fans.

Gloria Thorpe, a sports reporter, initially praises Joe's skills, but gradually becomes suspicious of his sudden appearance and complete lack of any backstory. Intrigued, she begins investigating Joe and Mr. Applegate.

Meanwhile, Joe is becoming increasingly unhappy, despite his newly found success as a ball player. He misses his old life, and especially Meg. Despite Mr. Applegate's instructions, young Joe moves into his former house as a boarder, renting a spare room from Meg. Fearful of losing his deal, Mr. Applegate tries to lure Joe back by introducing him to Lola, who attempts to seduce Joe away from his former life. When that fails, Mr. Applegate slanders Joe by leaking fake news that Joe is an escaped criminal and con artist. When Gloria discovers this information, she pursues the story. With no proof of his identity, and facing charges, Joe is put on trial.

With Joe's deal with Mr. Applegate about to expire, and the Senators preparing for their final game, will Joe be able to clear his name? Will the Senators finally win the pennant? Will he and Meg be reunited?

The Origin Story

Damn Yankees is a modern retelling of an old story. Since ancient times, and in many cultures, humans have told stories about interactions between mortals and supernatural beings.

The story of *Damn Yankees* is based on a German legend about a man named Faust, who meets the Devil at a crossroads and trades his soul for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. This Faustian legend is, in turn, based on a real person named Johann Georg Faust – who was a German astronomer, alchemist and magician during the German Renaissance in the mid-1400s. After his death, Johann became the subject of folk legend, and stories about him were spread through chapbooks – small booklets made of folded paper, similar to zines today.

As the Faustian legend gained popularity, other authors adapted the story, beginning with Christopher Marlowe in his 1604 play *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*. As time went on, the story gained more and more popularity, being retold, adapted, and adopted into popular culture by composers, authors, playwrights, directors, artists and illustrators.

By the time *Damn Yankees* was written in 1955, audiences would have been very familiar with the Faust legend and would have understood the comparison between Joe Boyd and Mr. Applegate in the musical, to Faust and the Devil in popular culture.

The Playwrights

Damn Yankees is considered a musical comedy, with a book (or words) by George Abbott and Douglass Wallop, and music and lyrics by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross.

George Abbott was an American theatre director and producer, who was also a playwright, screenwriter and film director. He had a prolific career that spanned eighty years! He worked with, and helped to launch the careers of, many in the entertainment industry including Desi Arnaz, Gene Kelly, Leonard Bernstein, Stephen Sondheim, Kander and Ebb, Liza Minnelli, and Carol Burnett. He was awarded many Tony Awards and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his contributions.

Douglass Wallop was an American novelist and playwright. He is the author of the novel “The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant,” which was written in 1954. The following year, Wallop worked with Abbott to adapt the novel into the musical *Damn Yankees*.

Richard Adler was a lyricist, writer, composer, and Broadway producer. He had a musical upbringing, and after serving in the Navy in WWII, he teamed up with Jerry Ross in 1950. Ross grew up in show business, as a professional singer and actor in the Yiddish Theatre scene in New York. Together, Adler and Ross became proteges of the famous composer, lyricist and publisher Frank Loesser. They produced a series of hits, most notably *The Pajama Game* and *Damn Yankees* on Broadway, and they seemed destined for a long and successful partnership.

Tragically, Jerry Ross died in 1955 at the age of 29, from complications of a lung disease – just a few months after the opening of *Damn Yankees* on Broadway. Despite his short life, he was extremely prolific – writing or co-writing more than 250 songs in addition to his theatre work. Adler continued working in theatre after Ross’ death, and also staged several shows for US presidents (including the famous “happy birthday” performance by Marilyn Monroe for President John F. Kennedy in 1962). Both Ross and Adler were inducted into the Songwriters’ Hall of Fame for their work.

The World of the Play

Damn Yankees is set in the United States in the middle of the 20th Century. The 1950s were a time of rapid change in the world. Following the end of WWII in 1945, people were eager to put wartime deprivations behind them. Everything got bigger and more luxurious – clothing, furniture, cars, and even hairstyles!

Rapid technological advancements meant people could access popular culture, and advertisers could reach mass audiences, for the first time. Early television shows provided the ideal vehicle for visual mass-marketing through commercials and program sponsorship. Similar to social media today, in the 1950s, it was nearly impossible to escape the messaging put out by advertisers – and it put pressure on people to reach for an ideal of perfection that was unattainable. It also created a cult of celebrity – just as people “go viral” today, in the 1950s, television created and enforced the idea of celebrities and celebrity culture. It also created extreme social pressure, particularly on women, to have the “perfect” life – just like on TV.

Societal roles were very narrowly defined as well. Although many women had entered the workforce during WWII, with the war's end, women were expected to go back home to make way for returning male veterans. Women and men were expected to get married and raise children – with men being the breadwinners and working outside of the home, and women staying home to look after children and the house. The ideal life was a home in the suburbs, with a nuclear family.

Of course – this ideal was not available or attainable for all. Single women, members of the LGBTQ2I+ community, or anyone who fell outside of the “norm” faced being ostracized from society. Although desegregation began in the US in the 1950s, American society was still very segregated along racial lines. Racism prevented those who were not white from accessing equitable jobs, housing and education.

One area which was becoming more accessible to Black Americans was in sports. Although there were professional Black baseball players in the US as early as the 1870s, by the 1880s, racism and active discrimination prevented Black players from obtaining professional contracts in American baseball until the 1940s, when Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby broke the game's colour barrier in the major leagues. By the 1950s, Black players such as Willie Mays were beginning to change the game - and peoples' perceptions. Despite facing racism and harassment, Mays was so successful that at one point, even the announcer encouraged the crowd to leave him alone, because he was obliterating the opposing team.

Unlike the 1950s, our production and acting ensemble reflect the makeup of society – The Shaw believes in hiring the best actor for the part, regardless of race, gender, orientation, or any other factor that is outside of the person's control. In addition, some of the lyrics in the show have been updated from the 1955 originals, to help modern audiences love the characters, without being distracted by outdated lyrics that we now consider inappropriate or offensive.

Our Production: The Design

Our creative team has tried to capture the spirit of the 1950s, while also commenting on some of the social norms and expectations of the time. The set design places the characters into a “box of perfection they can't escape from” – with ads and visual images constantly present and looming over the characters.

The director, Brian Hill, was interested in exploring how the ideal of perfection causes people to fight for things they perhaps shouldn't be fighting for – as he says, “the story is about a man who gives up everything to achieve ‘a thing’,” so the staging and design support the investigation of that idea. The set creates a box for the action – but also gives the illusion of a place where anything is possible.

The design takes cues from historical references, such Time Magazine articles and the Ed Sullivan TV show – kind of like a 1950s version of the Late Late Show with James Cordon. In addition, more modern influences like the show “Mad Men” were included. The Shaw also had conversations with Major League Baseball, to ensure the baseball uniforms were as accurate and authentic as possible.

Because the show moves quickly and changes locations often, both the set and the costumes need to help the audience identify where the action of the show is taking place. While the aesthetic of the show is the mid-1950s, some of the design pushes later into the decade, and even into the early 1960s. While you're watching the show, look at how the costume design changes for each character – how does it mirror or support the character's growth as the story progresses?

Due to the mythological nature of the story, and the supernatural aspects of Mr. Applegate and Lola's characters, there are elements of magic and illusion used throughout the show. The sets, lighting and staging must work together to support these elements of the production, and a professional Magic and Illusions Designer was brought in to help create the magic on stage. A good magician never reveals their secrets – but watch for those moments of theatre magic!

We look forward to seeing you soon at The Shaw!