

The PHILADELPHIA STORY

Study Guide and Dramaturgical Packet

Mia Haruko Logan

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TRACY: Story? What Story?

SANDY: The Philadelphia Story.

MARGARET: And what on earth's that?

- Act I

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The Story Behind the Play

Phillip Barry's play *The Philadelphia Story* premiered on March 28, 1939 at the Shubert Theatre on Broadway. The show ran for 417 performances and was so popular that before the show closed to go on the road in March 1940, the film version was already in the works. In December 1940, less than a year after the play closed on Broadway to go on tour, the film premiered in New York and was later generally released in January 1941 so as not to compete with the touring stage production.

The character of Tracy Lord was based on the real socialite, Helen Hope Montgomery Scott who was married to one of Phillip Barry's friends. He wrote the part specifically for Katherine Hepburn. In 1938 Katherine Hepburn was considered "box office poison" but Barry's play helped revive her career. Along with her partner at that time, Howard Hughes, Hepburn bought out her own contract with RKO Radio Pictures and acquired the film rights to *The Philadelphia Story*, which she sold to MGM Pictures on the condition that she be the star and have the right to choose her co-stars, Cary Grant and James Stewart. (They were the second choices as Hepburn's first choices, Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy, were unavailable.)

The Philadelphia Story is considered one of Barry's most popular plays. Philadelphia Ledger wrote it was "the season's most sparkling comedy" and Barry "the best manipulator of light dialogue in American theatre." The play also inspired a musical remake in 1956 called *High Society* starring Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Grace Kelly and Louis Armstrong.

About the Play

“You don’t know yet what being under the microscope does to people. [...] It’s a funny feeling.”
-Sandy Lord, Act I

The Philadelphia Story is a comedy that captures how one family (and one vivacious woman) respond to the presence of intrusive media while dealing with the drama of their private affairs during one of life’s momentous occasions. Sandy forewarns his family of the impending invasive reporters by describing their presence as producing a “funny feeling”. His words capture a crucial aspect of life not only in the world of Philip Barry’s play but also in the world of theater. Theater allows audiences exclusive access into other worlds where we are prompted to feel with the characters, to look into the microscope while simultaneously connecting with the observed specimen— it is indeed a funny feeling.

Barry aptly illustrates the social nuances, humor and this “funny feeling” at every instance in his rendering of the Lords, their guests and the ensuing trials in Seth Lord’s stately home in a wealthy Main Line neighborhood of Philadelphia. Yet Barry also manages to fashion a classic, universal story from his Main Line microcosm that points to larger issues of how class, sex and media continue to intersect even today.

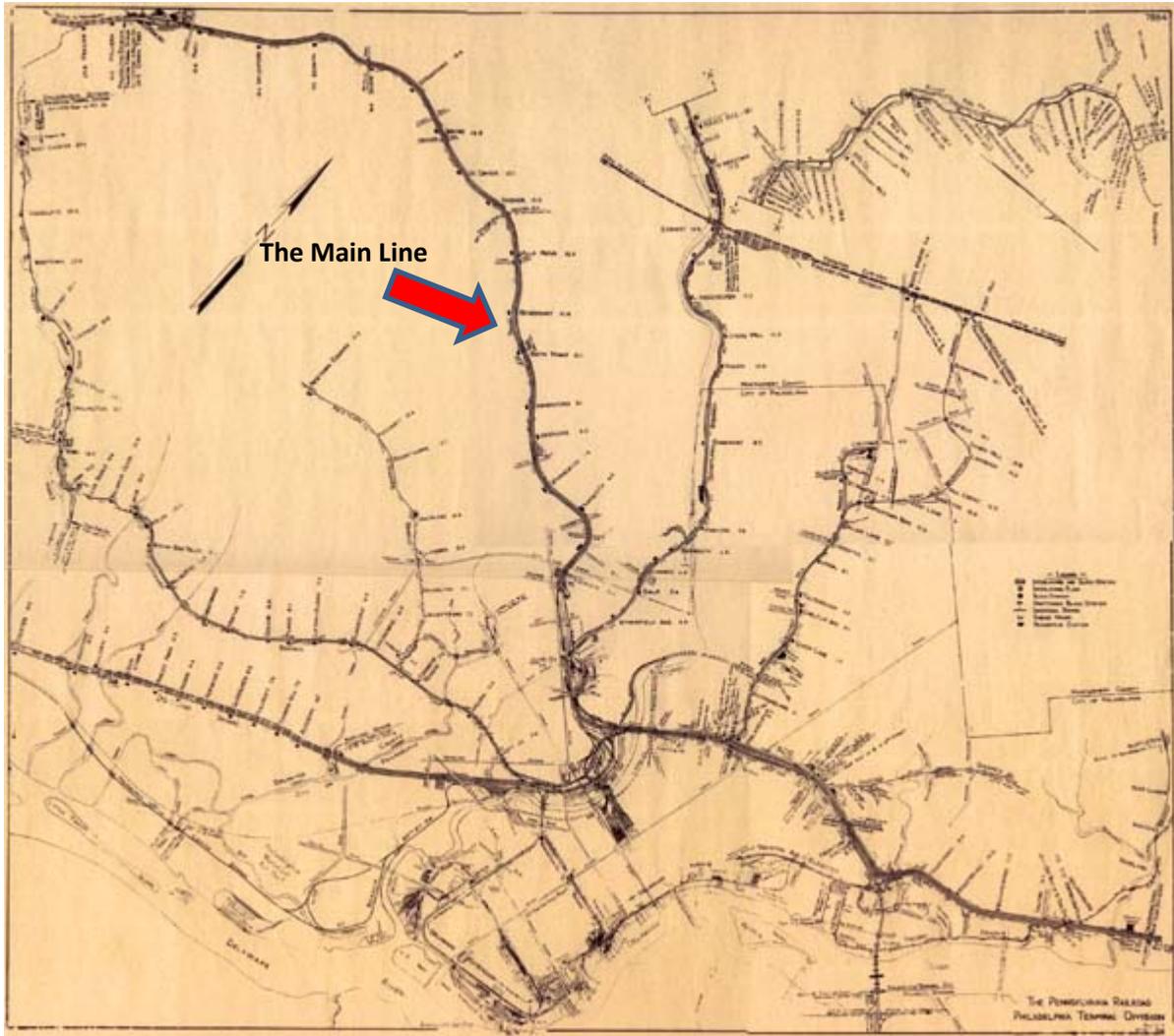
Along with the political and economic shifts in American society, the direction of mass media was at a turning point in the 1930s when Barry wrote *The Philadelphia Story*. The rise of magazines, tabloids and radio propelled pop culture into a new realm, not unlike our modern rise of the internet and social media. *The Philadelphia Story* remains relevant in contemporary culture as the industry and demand for scandalous tabloids has given birth to a persistent breed of paparazzi and an influx of reality television shows.

Essentially, the timelessness of Barry’s play reflects the human longing and need to connect and how understanding the other oftentimes reveals truths or falsehoods about oneself. Mike Connor and Tracy Lord breach their socio-economic class barriers and connect, discovering themselves and changing the course of their lives. So, although accompanied with “a funny feeling”, being “under the microscope” for twenty-four hours changes Tracy Lord’s understanding of herself and her exclusive world. By the end of the play, her enlightenment liberates her to feel less like an untouchable goddess and more “like a human being”. How might the microscope enlighten you?

-Mia Haruko Logan

Dramaturgical References

Main Line Philadelphia



“Main Line” is the name for the wealthy Western suburbs of Philadelphia. These neighborhoods were built along the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad, which ran northwest from downtown Philadelphia, running parallel to Lancaster Avenue (now U.S. Route 30) and the former Pennsylvania Railroad Main Line, which extended from the Philadelphia city limits to traditionally Bryn Mawr and ultimately to Paoli, PA. The Main Line rail line led to the development of the Main Line communities, which consisted of country estates built by some of Philadelphia’s wealthiest families.



Here are photographs from La Ronda, an estate formerly located in Bryn Mawr, Philadelphia, part of the Main Line region. (completed 1929-demolished 2009)

Social History Context ²

In the Great Depression the American dream had become a nightmare. What was once the land of opportunity was now the land of desperation. What was once the land of hope and optimism had become the land of despair. The American people were questioning all the maxims on which they had based their lives - democracy, capitalism, individualism. The best hope for a better life was California. Many Dust Bowl farmers packed their families into cars, tied their few possessions on the back, and sought work in the agricultural fields or cities of the West - their role as independent land owners gone forever. Between 1929 and 1932 the income of the average American family was reduced by 40%, from \$2,300 to \$1,500. Instead of advancement, survival became the keyword. Institutions, attitudes, lifestyles changed in this decade but democracy prevailed. Democracies such as Germany and Italy fell to dictatorships, but the United States and its constitution survived. Economics dominated politics in the 1930's. The decade began with shanty towns called Hoovervilles, named after a president who felt that relief should be left to the private sector, and ended with an alphabet soup of federal programs funded by the national government and an assortment of commissions set up to regulate Wall Street, the banking industry, and other business enterprises. The Social Security Act of 1935 set up a program to ensure an income for the elderly. The Wagner Act of 1935 gave workers the legal right to unionize. John L. Lewis founded the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and conditions for blue-collar workers improved. Joseph P. Kennedy, a Wall Street insider, was appointed Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commissions.

*Entertainment and Mass Media*³

Radio:

Radio reached its zenith of popularity in this decade. By 1939 about 80 percent of the population owned radio sets. Americans loved to laugh at the antics of such comedians as Jack Benny, Fred Allen, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Amos and Andy, and Fibber McGee and Molly. The soap opera dominated the daytime airwaves. *Our Gal Sunday* began each episode with the question, "Can a girl from a little mining town in the west find happiness as the wife of a wealthy and titled Englishman?" Many a woman's ear was glued to her radio every day in hopes of learning the answer. The heroics of the Lone Ranger, the Green Hornet, the Shadow, and Jack Armstrong, all-american boy, thrilled listeners both young and old and sold countless boxes of cereal. News broadcasts by commentators like H. V. Kaltenborn and Edward R. Murrow kept the public aware of the increasing crisis in Europe. Franklin Roosevelt used the medium in his "Fireside Chats" to influence public opinion. One of the most dramatic moments in radio history occurred on May 6, 1937, when the German airship Hindenburg burst into flames as it was about to land in Lakehurst, New Jersey. The horror of the incident was conveyed live by the reporter Herb Morrison. His reaction to what was happening in front of him still enthralled today. On October 30, 1938, a twenty-three-year-old Orson Welles broadcast on his Mercury Theater of the Air the H.G. Wells' story "War of the Worlds". Despite the disclaimer at the end of the program, the tale of a Martian invasion of Earth panicked a million listeners who mistook the play for a newscast. Such was the influence of radio in this its golden age.

Magazines:

The 1930s were a heyday for magazines. In 1935 there were 6,546 in the United States—half monthlies and one-quarter weeklies. Pulp fiction, comic books, and the new animated cartoons with synchronized sound were also popular. In the 1930s newspapers and radio were radically restructured, both in their operational foundation and in their content. Federal regulations governing mass media were established and remained in place, with little alteration, until the 1980s. Journalistic ethics and business protocols developed in the 1930s continued to govern mass media in the postwar era. The decade gave American mass media a distinct character.

More on Mass Media:

In many ways the American mass media as we know it is a product of the Depression. Mass media provided the Depression-era public with projections of their thwarted ambitions and expressions of their deep frustrations. Mass media was foremost entertainment, even in radio and newspapers, which were well suited for communication of news or other vital information.

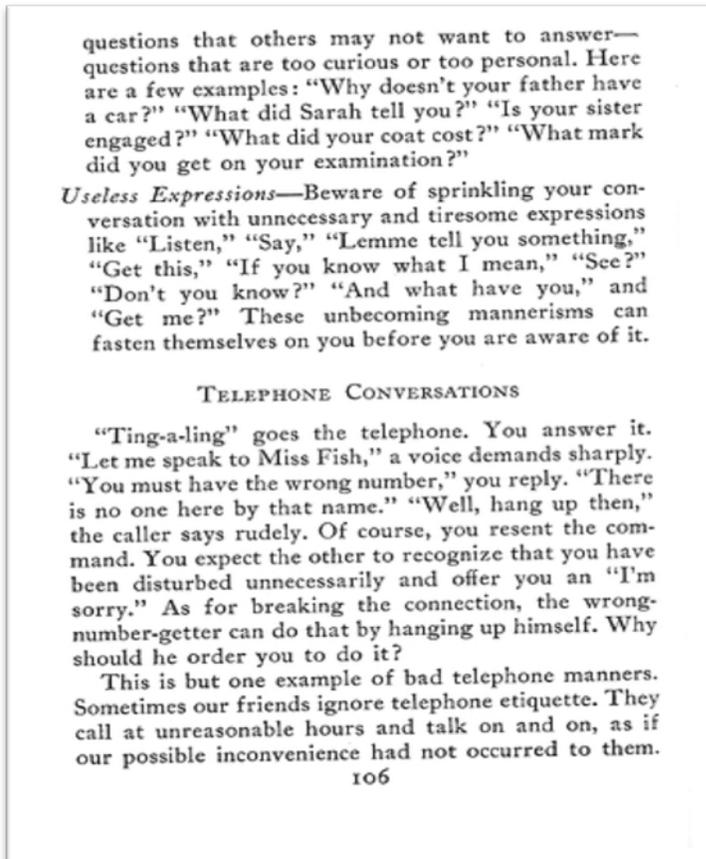
Like other businesses in the Depression, the mass media were forced to scale down and pay close attention to what the public wanted. Some newspapermen continued to fulfill their journalistic responsibilities to inform and educate the public. Others, such as William Randolph Hearst, understood that sensationalism—not detailed news presentation and analysis—sold papers. Hearst survived the Depression, but many of his idealistic competitors did not. Like other big businessmen, Hearst, David Sarnoff of RCA, Henry Luce of Time> William Paley of CBS, and other magnates of the communications field saw the Depression as an opportunity to expand their holdings, driving competitors out of business. The economics of the Depression and the psychological impact of the downturn on the public thus combined to strip the educational and informational potential from the mass media and turn them almost exclusively toward entertainment. In the early part of the decade the NBC-red network broadcast no news programming; educational radio was virtually nonexistent; pulp fiction presented lurid sex and violence; and newspapers focused on sensational events, simplistic presentation of news, and comic strips. All were well-loved by the public; all were highly profitable; all provided a temporary escape from the misery of the period. Mass media in the early 1930s thus pandered to the lowest—and sometimes the worst—common denominator of the American public. While the mass media in the 1930s were diversionary and entertaining, quite often that entertainment was implicitly political. Comedy, the most popular genre on radio during the decade, often got its laughs with the plot line of a poor person disrupting the social occasions of the rich.

Top Movie Stars of the 1930s:

- Shirley Temple
- Clark Gable
- Bing Crosby
- Jane Withers
- Robert Taylor
- William Powell
- Fred Astaire
- Ginger Rogers
- Sonja Henie
- Gary Cooper
- Myrna Loy

Etiquette

Interested in gaining more insight about the etiquette and social mores and manners of Margaret Lord's time? Check out Emily Post's book **Etiquette in society, in business, in politics, and at home** and read some of her tips to learn more. Also check out **This way, please: a book of manners** by Eleanor Boykin. (1941) Here's a snippet:



Here is popular advice on Servant's etiquette that Margaret Lord might have followed while running her household in the 1930's:

SERVANTS.⁴

"It is a very important point to have well-trained waiters, for, if they do not understand their duties, a good share of your comfort at table is destroyed.

Teach them yourself, when there is no company present, to hand the dishes and plates, and turn out the water at the left side of each person; train them to fill the tumblers without being asked for water, and to watch the needs of every one. Do not dispense with any of the little ceremonies of the table when you dine en famille, and then your servants, being trained to do good service every day, will not disappoint you when company is present.

Teach your girl to remove the soiled silver upon a small waiter by itself; to take the soiled knives upon a plate by themselves; and to take the plates, and afterwards the platters and dishes; and to do it all without any bustle or noise, but to move about quietly and silently.

Make it a point that she shall always wear a clean apron, and arrange her hair and dress tidily, and then when friends come in unexpectedly, you will not be mortified at your domestic arrangements.”

Designing Philadelphia Story: Peek Into the Design Process

At Live Arts, our productions are created by volunteers who donate their time and talent to create live theater. Here, some of our designers share their thoughts on putting together this production of *The Philadelphia Story*.

SARA BROWN

SCENIC DESIGNER

As a designer, I never find that I approach a play with a fully formed vision of the design. The initial work is all about discovering what is interesting and challenging about the given material with all of the people working on the production. I find that a design evolves over time through editing and conversation with collaborators. I always think of the initial vision for the design as a hypothesis - an opening bid. Then we see if it holds up - most of the time, this initial design doesn't - but it teaches us what we might want for v.2.

The initial design for *The Philadelphia Story* was essentially an elaborate toy theater video installation. That didn't make it past the early stages, but it got us thinking about how video might play a role. Betsy mentioned that some aspects of the script that are alluded to off stage are not really present on stage. This gave us the idea to use video interludes to animate the 'goings on' off stage and in the past. It also was a way to nod to the movie version of the piece without being slavish to it.

In terms of the physical environment, I thought it would be most important to create a world that suggested affluence, style and elegance. To me this was far more important than staying particular to a time period. We looked at lots of images of Main Line houses and settled on this facade. Instead of switching the world entirely for our scene changes, we simply conceive of the wall standing between the interior and exterior world. The scene change is a flip of that wall and a chance to see the other side. Since it straddles these worlds, it has details that suggest interior (moulding and wallpaper) and exterior (Shutters and trees featured in the wallpaper). In all, I think I was looking for a clear gesture to these two spaces without delving into the literal.



Living Room design for Live Arts' Production of *The Philadelphia Story* (2013).

TRICIA EMLET COSTUME DESIGNER

I watched the movie of *The Philadelphia Story*, but it was really a photo of Joan Crawford looking like an evil temptress, that made me want to start this show with black and white costumes. The idea was to break into color when the characters got up to mischief. Sisters Tracy and Dinah don kooky outfits to confuse the reporters who are invading their home to write about Tracy's wedding.

Dinah, the younger sister, has more costumes than anyone else. She's a hilarious character, and it was great fun to cook up ideas for her, even when the costumes flash in one door, dance across the stage and disappear forever. Her black and white outfit was inspired by a picture of Kate Moss in a short dress and boots hanging in a pool. Her kooky outfit was inspired by a fanciful picture of a model in polka dot tulle. Her riding habit was inspired by a period photo of sturdy ladies wearing ties and berets with their jodhpurs. I modeled her party dress on a dress from a 1939 Sears catalogue. See if you can count how many times Dinah wears polka dots!

The challenge of this show was its structure: casual clothes replaced by formal party clothes replaced by wedding clothes. How to distinguish the last two, especially when there are more men in the cast than women, and the men's clothes all started to look alike? I decided to use long formals for the party and shorter dresses for the daytime wedding. I also wanted to create an arc for Tracy's clothes, moving her from black and white into strong colors and ending in pastels as she learns to be a more forgiving person. I hope you enjoy the costumes in this show. And if you'd like to learn to design costumes, please join us here at Live Arts.



Photograph by Bruce Weber. Published in *Vogue*, November 2006.

FIELDING BRIGGS **HAIR & MAKEUP DESIGNER**

My vision with the hair and makeup was to have a modern take on the 1930's look! Modern doesn't always mean that it has to be futuristic. Modern in this case means I used utensils and products of today to create the look of old Fashions. Instead of using hot rollers we have used curling Irons to set the hair, and instead of heavy stage makeup I have chosen A lighter makeup with a matte finish to create a beautiful finish but without the cake like factor of traditional stage makeup. These things together create a well-rounded 1930's Look of the moment!

The most rewarding aspect of this project is the fact that I get to teach the actors how to do their hair and makeup. This stands out to me due to the fact that most actors rely on the artist to create the look for them! What I have done is allowed the actors to know how to become the characters. It's a little more personal. I enjoy this idea and it also allows them to have the knowledge that they can then use in other shows. Knowledge is Power!

The challenge for me is how to make things from the past relevant again. It shouldn't feel like a history lesson on the fashion of the day. I hope the audience walks away wanting to try some of the looks they saw onstage!



ANNE SHELTON PROPERTIES DESIGNER

What has been the most rewarding aspect for you while realizing your vision?

Lots of help! The support and teamwork has been great. Daryl, Betsy, Tracie and Sara have all contributed by helping with design opinions, prop acquisition and, in the case of polishing a full table of silver, good old fashioned elbow grease.

What has been your favorite piece or element in your design? Why?

I love researching what would have been current in the 1940s. Small elements like recreating Champagne bottles or finding working cameras give a feeling of achievement. Even if every audience member can see it on stage, it gives me a lot of satisfaction knowing the details are all there.

See below for an example of a props list:

Scene	Prop	Used in a previous scene?	Person	Prop Acquired	Borrowed From	Notes
Act 1, Scene i	Wedding Gifts		Preset	Yes		Silver and Crystal, lots
	Telephone		Preset	Yes	4CP	Indoor
	Galley Proofs		Dinah	Yes		"Broadway and Finance"
	Three Page Typed List		Margaret	Yes		
	Portfolio		Margaret	Yes		For typed list
	Fountain Pen		Margaret	Yes		
	Tag for gift		Tracy	Yes		"Old Dutch Muffin Ear"
	Game Shears		Tracy	Yes		Very used
	Cards		Tracy	Yes		For Thank You notes
	Fountain Pen		Tracy	Yes		
	Seating Chart		Tracy	Yes		
	Pencil		Tracy	Yes		
	Nancy Drew Book		Sandy	Yes		Extra Book Covers, Wrapped in brown paper and string
	Camera		Liz	Yes	ProCamera	Contax
	Typewritten Cards		Mike	Yes		
	Family History Book		Sandy	Yes	UVA	
	Tray		Edward	Yes		For Sherry
	Sherry Decanter		Edward	Yes	UVA	Filled with Apple Juice,
	Sherry Glasses, 6		Edward	Yes		

CRISTAN KEIGHLEY

SOUND DESIGNER

Overall Design: Betsy [the director] used a phrase that I latched onto for the sound design of this show: "Selective Realism." To me this meant that the play was rooted in its stated period, but also needed to be timeless for the audience. The designers were going to give a nod to the era, but not be confined by it. I decided that I would chose music that was either from the period and remade by modern artists or modern music that incorporated the style of the time – focusing on early jazz and swing, but not ruling out other influences that would have been heard in the Lord household or by an audience seeing the premier of the play in 1939. The secondary influences of the design were lofty concepts such as "Fun," "Sarcasm" and "Irony" (whenever possible). The primary opportunity for sound design is in the music – for pre-show, intermission and curtain call, and I tried to find music that referenced the instrumentation and style of the period, regardless of when it was actually written, while adhering to relevance and and/or liveliness.

Internal Cue Design: Most of the sound cues happen in Act III of the script (2nd half of this production), with an orchestra heard offstage. Betsy rightly thought that party/crowd noise would help with those cues. After watching a rehearsal, I added cues that would introduce this crowd/music sound with every opening of the center doors, which were established as being the entrances/exits to where the wedding was happening. I felt that it helped the urgency of the action (a reminder of that impending event), and, as Chris Kelly noted in a production meeting, it adds a bit of theatrics to keep it in the realm of "Romantic Comedy." This, however, increased the number of cues in that act from three to twelve and created a terrible-but-fun-challenge for the sound board operator in attempting to mimic the party coming through opening and closing doors, thus needing to watch the stage action very closely. I hope this is a "selectively realistic" choice that helps the action and audience experience.

The Orchestra: The script calls for an orchestra to play "Oh Promise Me" and "The Wedding March," but with the added cues, I chose another piece, "A Fine Romance" for doors opening and closing during the interim between those pieces. It's impossible to find the same "orchestra" playing all those numbers, so I scored them (for the geeks: using Finalé) to make it sound like the same orchestra is playing. The Lord family probably would have hired a small string orchestra, but I made it a string quartet and added winds – purely to call back to the time period. When we hear clarinets, saxophones and trombones, we're sonically reminded of Swing, Jazz, and the 30s & 40s in our imagination. I sought those same instruments in choosing the pre-show, intermission and end music.

Videos: These were an added production element that needed sound design, and the original intent was to score them from scratch because they're of a specific length and the opening video has varied imagery/elements that morph into each other. Because of time and technical fears, we couldn't marry the sound to the videos in perfect sync, so compromises were made. The only original composing is in the pizzicato strings heard in the opening video; the beginning

and end are original arrangements of existing pieces, and the middle is a collection of found music. The other scene change and intermission videos were more homogenous and catered to a single piece.

The Curtain Call: The Postmodern Orchestra is a very special group of folks who remake modern songs in various styles, almost always being more tasteful and entertaining than the originals (since they tackle artists like Nickelback, Miley Cyrus and Ke\$ha). They put out this version of Lorde's Royals at the end of October, and I found it to be serendipitous – both because of its style and its lyrical content. In my mind, it's a modern responding anthem to the play from the audience's perspective.

I hope the sound design for this production helps to give it a life it couldn't have had otherwise and helps to add to the overall perception and enjoyment of everyone experiencing it. Most of all, I hope it's "fun."

¹ For more information and maps visit <http://www.lowermerionhistory.org/maps.html>

² Information and direct excerpts from <http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade30.html>

³ Information and direct excerpts from <http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade30.html> and <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3468301250.html>

⁴ Excerpted from: <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/eyebright/etiquette/etiquette.html>

Link to a digital copy of A Manual of Etiquette with Hints on Politeness and Good Breeding by Daisy Eyebright (aka author Sophia Oren (Edwards) Johnson)> <http://www.familyfindings.com/2008/05/johnson-sophia-orne-edwards/>