

Holiday Memories

by Truman Capote
adapted by Russell Vandenbroucke
November 9 through December 6, 1994

IRT

INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE
140 WEST WASHINGTON STREET
INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA 46204

LIBBY APPEL, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

REMEMBERED TALES

"The Thanksgiving Visitor" & "A Christmas Memory"

Both "The Thanksgiving Visitor" and "A Christmas Memory," the two short stories by Truman Capote which are the basis for *Holiday Memories*, focus on the adventures of a young boy named Buddy and his beloved best friend, a childlike elderly cousin named Sook. Set in the tiny town of Monroeville, Alabama, during the Depression, the action of the play recreates Thanksgiving and Christmas as celebrated by Buddy and Sook in the large rambling house where they live with several other distant cousins. Five actors create the whole world of the stories: two male actors play the young Buddy and his grown-up counterpart, Truman; an actress portrays Sook; and one male and one female actor portray the other members of Buddy and Sook's world, including relatives, schoolchildren, a teacher, a mysterious Indian, and various neighbors.

The stories are autobiographical; writer Truman Capote is writing about his own childhood: he is Buddy, and Sook is his cousin. Young Truman (called Buddy) was left by his mother with this extended family after she divorced his father, and he was raised by these cousins from age 4 until age 10. The stories chronicle, with touching clarity, the joys and frustrations of being the only child living in this household of elderly cousins.

In "The Thanksgiving Visitor" Capote recounts a particular Thanksgiving when

Sook forces Buddy to invite his archenemy, Odd Henderson, to Thanksgiving dinner. Odd is the school-yard bully and regularly harasses Buddy, but Sook thinks that one must "come to terms with people like Odd Henderson and turn them into friends." When Buddy refuses to invite Odd, Sook extends the invitation herself; much to Buddy's surprise and dismay, Odd accepts. What happens on the fateful day teaches Buddy a valuable lesson about compassion and forgiveness. "The Thanksgiving Visitor" celebrates the value of friendship and the importance of generosity.

The second act introduces "A Christmas Memory" and recalls the holiday rituals that Buddy and Sook perform in anticipation of Christmas. First they make fruitcakes—31 of them—which they send all over the country as gifts for friends or "people who've struck our fancy" like President Roosevelt or missionaries in Borneo. Next they are off to cut a Christmas tree, an all-day event that takes them through the woods of Alabama in the winter. As the anxiously awaited Christmas morning draws closer, Buddy and Sook are consumed with excitement as they labor secretly over presents for one another. "A Christmas Memory" celebrates the love of two people from different generations, the importance of tradition, and the strength of friendship and of memory to keep it all alive. ★



Young Truman Capote (Buddy) and his cousin Sook.

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The Rememberer and His Memories

TRUMAN CAPOTE

Truman Capote was born Truman Streckfus Persons on September 30, 1924, in New Orleans. When he was four years old his parents divorced and his mother sent him to live with her elderly cousins in Monroeville, Alabama. Sook, the eldest of the three female cousins, was the youngest in mind and spirit, and she became Truman's confidante and closest friend. Thought to be retarded, Sook rarely left the house and knew the outside world only through the eyes of her young "Buddy."

Truman could read before he started school; among his favorite books were the "Hardy Boys" and "Rover Boys" series. He also loved the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. He began writing at the age of nine or ten, although there were no writers in his family, "nor even any readers to speak of," he once said. When he took up writing he seemed to know at once that he had found his vocation: "In a way, I used up some of my loneliness by writing."

But Truman was not entirely without childhood friends: he met neighbors Nelle Harper Lee and her brother Edwin during these years. Nelle went on to write *To Kill a Mockingbird* under the pen name Harper Lee; the character of Dill in the book is none other than the youthful Truman Capote.

When Truman was ten his mother remarried and sent for him to come live with her in New York City. Many of his teachers considered him subnormal; he played hooky twice a week and often ran away from home. His parents finally sent him to a psychiatric clinic, where he was classified as a genius

and released.

Despite the fact that he didn't like school and did poorly in English, "he was always writing down descriptions of things," a cousin later wrote. "He trained with a pencil and paper in the same way that a musician works with notes or an artist with colors." In high school, with the encouragement of an English teacher named Catherine Wood, he began to submit stories to magazines for publication. (Many years later he would dedicate "A Christmas Memory" to her.) In one day, three of his short stories were accepted by various magazines, and his literary career was launched at the tender age of 17.

That same year Truman went to work at the *New Yorker* magazine, first as an accountant—until it was discovered that he couldn't add—then as a mail

room clerk, and eventually as a feature writer. He published his first novel—the highly acclaimed *Other Voices, Other Rooms*—in 1948 at the age of 24.

Capote's writing contains great variety, moving back and forth from southern tales such as "A Christmas Memory" and "The Thanksgiving Visitor" to New York comedies like *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, which won many awards and was made into a movie starring Audrey Hepburn in 1961. Through his many articles for the *New Yorker*, Capote redefined journalism by combining his genius for prose with the description of factual information. In 1966, when Capote published *In Cold Blood*, a "non-fictional novel" about the murder of a respectable Kansas farming family, he was hailed as Literary Man of the Year.

Capote lived an elegant and fast-paced life and knew many famous people of the sixties and seventies: Elizabeth Taylor, Montgomery Clift, Marilyn Monroe, and Andy Warhol, to name only a few, were among his friends. Later in his life he began to write searing exposés about these famous people, which earned him considerable discredit among the rich and famous.

Truman Capote died in his sleep in 1984 at age 60, having achieved recognition in international literary circles as one of America's most versatile and talented writers. ★

(left) Truman Capote in 1955,
one year before
"A Christmas Memory"
was published.



About the Stage

The IRT's Upperstage theatre has undergone a change this season. When you enter the auditorium, you will notice risers and rows of chairs arranged on the stage floor. Only a few of the front rows of permanent seats are being used.

Instead of using the auditorium as it was built, this year we are experimenting with theatre in a more intimate setting, in a style called "three-quarter round." This term refers to the fact that the audience are seated on three sides of the actors, rather than only in front of them. This gives the audience an "up close and personal" view of the actors and allows the audience to feel a greater sense of participation in the production.

Many historical periods have featured seating in this style. Shakespeare's theatre in Elizabethan England seated the audience on three sides of the actors, which made for a lively and enthusiastic

dynamic between actors and audience. One of the advantages of this type of staging is that the actors and audience are easily aware of each other, because the audience can see other audience members seated across from them and the actors must move in circular patterns in order to be seen by the audience on all three sides.

As you watch this play, try to think about how this seating configuration influences your response to the production. How might your experience be different if the stage had been arranged in another fashion? Take careful note of how the actors move to accommodate the audience.

Life in the 1930s

The time in which our play is set is 1932 in rural Alabama. Life 62 years ago was very different from what it is today. Many things we take for granted were luxuries for most families or had not even been invented. Most houses in rural Alabama did not have electricity (although Buddy's family in the play, a little more well off, does). Many people kept gardens and grew their own food for canning, or had smokehouses where they would smoke meat from animals they had raised and butchered themselves. Not many of us do those things today.

Two events make this time even more remote to our understanding: Prohibition and the Great Depression. Both events help mold the world in which Buddy and Sook live and are a part of the story we will hear.

Prohibition was the law prohibiting the brewing, distilling, or importing of beer, wine, or liquor in the United States. The 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the law was passed in October 1919. It was difficult to enforce, however, and many *bootleggers* made, transported, or sold unlawful liquor (the name was taken from the old practice of hiding a liquor bottle in the top of a boot). When Buddy and Sook need whiskey for their fruitcakes, they go to Haha, a local bootlegger who distills his own whiskey.

The Great Depression is the name we have given to the years from 1930 to 1938 when business, employment, and stock values were at their lowest levels ever. The Depression had its roots in the 1920s, when many urban Americans were living the high life, while in rural areas farmers were faced with increased expenses and lower crop prices. Rural population between 1921 and 1928 fell

by 3 million as people moved to cities to work for factories and businesses. The town that Buddy and Sook live near in the play is quite small and poor.

In the cities money was plentiful, or so it seemed. One of the favorite schemes for making easy money was borrowing money to invest in the stock market. As more people bought stock, the prices went higher. The person "playing" the market would then sell at a profit, pay back the loan, and have made money without any investment.

This type of gambling went on until October 29, 1929, now called "Black Tuesday," when the stock market "crashed," with stock prices falling 40%—that is, the value of stock (which is a share in a company) was 40% less than it had been the day before. People who had borrowed money to buy stock found that it was now worth less than they had paid for it, and they lost everything. Many panicked and started selling their stock for any price they could get, making the prices fall even further. Companies lost their investment capital and laid off workers. Laid-off workers had no money and could not buy products, so companies could not sell, and laid off more workers.

By 1932 the country was at the lowest point of the time now called the Great Depression. Almost 12 million people were unemployed.

That year Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to his first term as President. People really believed that Roosevelt could make a difference in their lives and saw him as a friend of the common man.

That is why Sook and Buddy send him one of their fruitcakes.

When the Depression began, some of the first victims were the banks themselves. Many banks had been lending money to people to invest in stock.

When those people were unable to pay their loans, the banks found themselves short on cash; some banks lost millions of dollars.

When depositors heard that banks were low on funds, they rushed to withdraw their deposits, putting an additional drain on bank funds. Many banks closed, taking with them the life savings of depositors. After the crash, many people stopped saving at the bank, preferring to hide their money around the house or bury it in the yard. Sook and Buddy hide their savings under a floorboard, under the bed, under the chamber pot—all places that seem safer to them than a bank.

Alabama farmers in the early 1930s were still caught in the old tenant farmer system that had developed after the Civil War.

Landless laborers entered into sharecropping agreements with landowners. The laborers would raise a cash crop (usually cotton, tobacco, sugar, or rice) and, as payment for the use of the land, share the income from the sale of the crop with the landowner—the sharecropper getting the meager portion. Unfortunately at this time, cash crops were not bringing in much money: in 1932 cotton was worth 6.5 cents per pound, certainly not enough to feed a family. Many farmers did not understand the idea of subsistence farming—raising food for oneself and more for barter—but continued to grow the same old crops for sale. Thus families like Odd Henderson's in the play could live on the land and still starve. ★

(above right)
Sook goes out;
costume rendering
by Chris Kedny.

(left)
Scenic design
model by
Karen TenEyck.
Note the
audience figures
on either side
of the stage.

Study guide printed by
Meridian Insurance.



From Page to Stage: Creating a Play from a Fictional Source

Sharing our stories is one of the greatest pleasures of human interaction. The storyteller entertains by weaving imagery and experience into a captivating adventure. Both storyteller and listener profit from the experience of storytelling: as the storyteller unfolds the tale, he relives the excitement of his own experience while the audience receives his transmission of wisdom through time and reflection.

Holiday Memories is a dramatization of two short stories by famed American writer Truman Capote. The first act of the play is composed of a story called "The Thanksgiving Visitor" which was originally published in *McCall's* in 1967. The second act dramatizes Capote's story "A Christmas Memory" which first appeared in *Mademoiselle* in 1956. This story has received numerous stage and film adaptations, and frequently appears on television around Christmastime.

In 1991 playwright Russell Vandenbroucke took these two stories and adapted them for the stage, using Capote's own language, but creating action and dialogue from Capote's narrative passages. Vandenbroucke chose to create two narrator characters as vehicles to transmit the plot and language of the stories: Buddy, age seven, is the main character of the two short stories and an active participant in the action, while his grown self, Truman, the writer-rememberer, watches and comments on the proceedings.

This stage convention of the two nar-

rators allows us to experience the very act of memory: sometimes Buddy must correct the older Truman's inaccurate recollections as he relives the past. Truman, through the wisdom of age, guides the youthful Buddy and the audience to see the boy's future. Using these narrators also allows Vandenbroucke to retain much of the wonderful narrative language which Capote uses to weave his tales.

To illustrate this process, here's an example of what Capote wrote, taken from the beginning of "A Holiday Memory":

Imagine a morning in late November. A coming of winter morning more than twenty years ago. Consider the kitchen of a spreading old house in a country town. A great black stove is its main feature; but there is also a big round table and a fireplace with two rocking chairs placed in front of it. Just today the fireplace commences its seasonal roar.

A woman with shorn white hair is standing at the kitchen window. She is wearing tennis shoes and a shapeless gray sweater over a summery calico dress. She is small and sprightly, like a bantam hen; but, due to a long youthful illness, her shoulders are pitifully hunched. Her face is remarkable—not unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that, and tinted by sun and wind; but it is delicate too, finely boned, and her eyes are sherry-colored and timid. "Oh my," she exclaims, her breath smoking the windowpane, "it's fruitcake weather!"

Now here's how Vandenbroucke adapted this narrative language for the stage:

SOOK

(Gazing out the window) *Oh my, it's fruitcake weather.*

TRUMAN

Imagine a morning in late November. A coming of winter morning many years ago. Consider the kitchen of a spreading old house in a country town. Just today the fireplace commences its seasonal roar.

BUDDY

Her face is remarkable—not unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that.

TRUMAN

And tinted by sun and wind; but it is delicate too, finely boned, and her eyes are sherry-colored and timid.

SOOK

Oh my, it's fruitcake weather!

Notice what Vandenbroucke uses from Capote, and what he can eliminate because it can be shown through character action or setting. He doesn't have to have the actors tell about the kitchen because the audience member can see this on the stage. He doesn't have to describe Sook's appearance because much of it can be illustrated through the costume, wig, and makeup the actress wears and the posture she assumes. But he does use the descriptive phrases that couldn't be captured visually, like the reference to Lincoln.

This act of converting narrative fiction into a stage play is called "Chamber Theatre." As a writing technique it allows audiences to experience the magic of a favorite story or novel in a live theatre setting, experiencing the thrill of seeing a beloved character spring to life off the pages of a book. ★

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

- What is your favorite holiday memory? Think about it as if you were going to write a story about it. Who are the characters? Where does it take place? What happens in the story? How did you feel when it was happening? Do you feel differently about it now?
- Interview a friend or family member who is over 30 years old. Ask the person to tell a favorite childhood holiday memory. Write a story about this person's experience. How is it different from experiences in your life?
- Imagine your family sharing a holiday memory. Do each of you have the same memories or different ones? Do you remember the events the same as your other family members, or are your memories different?
- Ask someone you know who is older than 60 to recall events in their life from the Depression.
- What makes a holiday ritual? What are Buddy and Sook's rituals, and what are your family's rituals? What is the importance of ritual in a family?
- How do memories help to shape our lives?

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