

COME FROM AWAY



Study Guide | 9–12th Grade



Fine Arts Center

COME FROM AWAY



BEFORE THE SHOW

Welcome!

Traditionally, musicals have offered a chance to escape and experience a space where a character's inner conflicts and emotions become visible. They offer the opportunity to take the chaos of a complicated world and provide order. They invite audiences into the messiness of a character's hopes, dreams, despair, and, ultimately, triumph. Usually something that is epic, causing people to sing it in the shower, their cars, or at karaoke night. From romantic stories to massive hits and spectacles like *West Side Story*, *Les Misérables*, *The Sound of Music*, *Wicked*, and *Cabaret*.

In contrast, modern musicals such as *Rent*, *In the Heights*, *Dear Evan Hansen*, and *Waitress* examine more realistic social issues such as gentrification, the AIDS crisis, identity, xenophobia, and self-advocacy. *Come From Away* fits into the later type of musical; it deals with complex messages—in this case a focus on finding connection in a time of uncertainty, overcoming prejudice and preconceived biases, and finding a balance between hope and grief.



A few reminders so that you and others can enjoy the play fully:

- Please make sure that you have completely turned off your cellphone, smartwatch, and any other device.
- No photography or video recording of any kind is permitted, as the setting, artwork, set pieces, and script are intellectual property and may be protected by copyright.
- Please remain quiet during the play itself and save all conversations for the intermission or after the show. This is a live show, not a TikTok video!

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ABOUT THE SHOW

Synopsis

Come From Away tells the true story of Operation Yellow Ribbon, when Canadian airspace took on the task of diverting civilian planes in response to the United States closing its airspace in response to the attacks on September 11, 2001. This happened all over

Canada. The play looks specifically at the 7,000 people from the US and other countries who landed at the airport of Gander, Newfoundland, and the Canadian people who embraced them and comforted the travelers who “come from away.”

CHARACTER BREAKDOWNS

There is a total of 12 people in the cast for this play—six men and six women ranging in age from their 20s to their 60s. While there is a large cast of characters it is important to note that every cast member has a primary role and various secondary roles. (Each cast member’s secondary role(s) are listed in parentheses.)

Locals

Claude: The well-liked Mayor of Gander. (*Also Derm, Brenda’s Brother, and Eddie*)

Bonnie: Mother-of-three, stops at nothing to help the animals on the planes. (*Also Martha*)

Beulah: Head of the Gander Veterans Association. (*Also Delores*)

Oz: The constable of the two-person police force of Gander. (*Also Joey, Customs Officer, Mr. Micheals Terry, Matty Rabbi Head, and Cardiologist*)

Doug: Air Traffic Controller and married to Bonnie.

Janice: A new TV reporter, thrown into the deep end on her first day. (*Also Britney and Flight Attendant*)

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Beverley: The first female captain of American Airlines who has always loved flying. *(Also Anette and Reporter)*

Diane: A divorcee from Texas, embracing a new carefree version of herself. *(Also Crystal and Brenda)*

Nick: An Englishman, focused on work who falls in love with Diane. *(Also Doug, Officer Stephenson, and Townsperson)*

Kevin T: From L.A. and traveling for vacation with his boyfriend and secretary, Kevin J. Inspired by generosity, he created the Pay It Forward Foundation. *(Also Garth and President Bush)*

Kevin J: Kevin T's boyfriend and secretary. Sarcastic, and wants to leave as soon as he can. *(Also Dwight and Ali)*

Bob: From NYC, is suspicious of everyone and worried about WW3. *(Also Muhumuza and Captain Bristol)*

Hannah: A mother of a firefighter in Manhattan, anxiously waits for information about her son. *(Also Margie and Mickey)*



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KEY THEMES

Come From Away primarily deals with the following themes:

Resilience: Regarding both the town of Gander and the surrounding areas mobilizing so quickly to support the people who land in their town and also the wider response of the United States recovering from 9/11.

Hospitality and human kindness: A town with a population of nearly 10,000 people open their hearts and shelters in order to care for close to 7,000 strangers.

Grief and loss: In the midst of a story that is uplifting and hopeful, not everyone's experience is positive. Hannah is dealing with the anxiety and stress of waiting to hear if her son, who is a firefighter, is all right. And the character of Beverly is close friends with one of the pilots of the planes that crashed.

Connection across differences: The people from Gander and the “plane people” come from diverse backgrounds and cultures, but they manage to find common ground.



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THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

Setting: Gander and the surrounding towns in Newfoundland, Canada.
September 11-16, 2001.

- In the 1950s Gander was known as the “Crossroads of the World” as it was home to the world’s biggest airport. This was due to the location of the city in the Northeast part of the Canadian province of Newfoundland. It was a strategic refueling location for planes flying from Europe to the United States.
- On September 11, 2001 Gander was one of the locations where airplanes were diverted to land when the North American airspace was closed. Residents of Gander opened their homes to support the passengers and crews of the 38 planes that were forced to land at Gander Airport.

Authors: Irene Sankoff & David Hein are a Canadian writing team. In addition to *Come From Away*, they are best known for the musical, *My Mother’s Lesbian Jewish Wiccan Wedding*. This is based upon the real story of David Hein’s own mother’s wedding. *Come From Away* was nominated for a 2018 Grammy Award and several 2017 Tony Awards, winning Best Direction of a Musical.

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LESSON PLAN

Pre-lesson Work

For homework before the lesson, have students interview family members and other adults about their experiences of living through 9/11. They will take notes on a handful of questions and then compile the experiences in class. This should be assigned two days and one week before the lesson.

Lesson Plan

This lesson is broken into two sections:

- **Part 1:** Intro to Newfoundland and Gander
- **Part 2:** 9/11 and Operation Yellow Ribbon

Standards Addressed

- **SS.HS.1.1**—Apply the process of inquiry to examine and analyze how historical knowledge is viewed, constructed, and interpreted.
- **SS.HS.1.2**—Analyze and evaluate key concepts of continuity and change, cause and effect, complexity, unity and diversity, and significant ideas in the United States from Reconstruction to the present.

Part 1: Intro to Newfoundland and Gander

Intro (5 minutes): Choose one based upon your students and your school.

- **Option 1:** Ask students to imagine they are on a flight, and the pilot announces that they are about to land in a place that they've never heard of, in a country they weren't planning to visit, and, for security reasons, no one can contact family or friends. Have students spend three minutes writing in their journals in response to the questions: *What are you thinking about? What are you worried about?*
- **Option 2:** Have 6,700 passengers and 9,000 locals written on the board as the class enters. Have students spend three minutes writing in their journal in response to the question: *What event might cause as many strangers to show up in a town as people who already live there?*

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The Setting of the Play (5-10 minutes)

- Newfoundland is located on the eastern coast of Canada and makes up the easternmost province of Canada. It is split between two areas: Labrador (the part of the continental part of Canada) and the island of Newfoundland, otherwise known by locals as “The Rock.”
- Show this one-minute [clip](https://youtu.be/TM6TT7-Ky-4?si=QUnOI70nTZ2Dz9-l) to see the location and setting of the musical! <https://youtu.be/TM6TT7-Ky-4?si=QUnOI70nTZ2Dz9-l>
- Check-in questions about the setting:
 - What surprised you about the setting?
 - Could you survive if the nearest Starbucks was four hours away?
 - A few different key pieces of Newfoundland trivia!
 - A “come from away” is someone who is new to the island/not born there.
 - The Newfoundland Dog and Labrador Retriever are the province’s official dog breeds!
 - The province has its own time zone! It is 90 minutes ahead of Eastern Standard Time. Yes, it’s not a round hour, it’s a half-hour ahead of Atlantic Standard Time (used by Puerto Rico, Caribbean Islands, and parts of Canada).
 - Newfoundland is pronounced Newfound-land not Newfound-lund.
 - The UNESCO Heritage Site L’Anse aux Meadows (“Bay with the grasslands”) was the first location and settlement of Europeans in North America. The Norse/Vikings arrived there around 1000 years ago!
- Other good resources for the setting can be found on the *Come From Away* website under setting: <https://comefromaway.com/setting.php>. There are different words and phrases from the dialect of the island, some more information about the numbers of people who live/landed on the island, and some information about the Screech-in that appears in the play.

Part 2: 9/11 and Operation Yellow Ribbon (20-60 minutes)

- Depending on your school's schedule, this section can be expanded or shortened for time. Instead of creating an in-depth lesson plan and power point, this section focuses on an Oral History assignment and activity to discuss and learn about 9/11. This year (2026) marks the 25th Anniversary of the attacks and everyone knows someone who was alive at that time. Using the Historical Method, the students need to engage in an Oral History assignment to gather information about their family members' experiences of the attacks. **This should be introduced and completed before the class period in which you are going through this part of the lesson.**
- Oral History is the process of collecting and documenting the first-hand lived experiences, memories, and voices of those that the interviewer is interviewing. Appendix 1 is a pre-generated list of questions for students to fill out. You can use this list or do a brainstorming activity to create your own list!
- Follow any of your school guidelines in terms of recording or interviewing. (i.e. If you need permission slips or more.)
- Some vital information to cover with the students about interviews:
 - It's ok to let the silence stretch. Some people need some time to process and reflect on the subject before they answer. Sometimes the moments of silence are powerful!
 - It is ok for a family member to not answer a question. The memories that are brought up can be difficult and painful. If a family member or someone close was lost it can still be a deep scar.
- After everyone presents a minute or two on their interview information, here are some good reflection questions to discuss as a group:
 - What made the interview difficult? Special? Surprising?
 - What was your responsibility as a storyteller? Did you emphasize anything? Leave anything out?
 - How did the story you gathered fit with those of your classmates?
 - How is the story that you gathered similar or different from those of your classmates shared?

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Operation Yellow Ribbon

- What is it?
 - Canada initiated Operation Yellow Ribbon to manage the diversion of civilian flights from US airspace. This operation aimed to quickly remove potentially threatening air traffic from US skies and safely ground these aircraft in Canada. Between 225 and 240 flights were diverted to 17 Canadian airports.
- Operation Yellow Ribbon is a decent documentary to watch. The first 10 minutes are about the morning of 9/11.
 - If you choose to use the video, please have students do the S-I-T strategy for notetaking. Ask them to look for at least 4 items for each section in their notes.
 - S – Surprising: something that shocks you or goes against what you thought.
 - I – Interesting: details that catch your attention or make you want to learn more.
 - T – Troubling: something that worries you, feels confusing, or raises ethical concerns.





PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

- Think of a time your community (school, town, family) came together after something difficult happened. What did people do for each other?
- The passengers in this story come from many different countries, religions, and backgrounds. What challenges might arise when thousands of strangers are suddenly forced together?
- Newfoundland has a strong cultural tradition of hospitality towards strangers. Can you think of any places or communities today known for that same reputation?
- 9/11 happened before your generation was born. How does that distance in time change the way you think this story should be told to you?

POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

- What was your first reaction when the show ended?
- Was there a moment that made you laugh? A moment that made you tear up? Describe both.
- Did anything surprise you—about the story, the staging, or your own emotional response?
- How did the play handle Ali's experience of being treated with suspicion because he's Muslim? What did that storyline add to your understanding of 9/11's aftermath?
- Beverley Bass's story (the first female American Airlines captain) is woven throughout. Why do you think the writers chose to highlight her specifically?
- The actors played multiple roles throughout the show. Did that confuse you, or did it add something? What effect do you think it created?
- What do you think *Come From Away* wants audiences today—many of whom weren't alive in 2001—to take away from this story?
- If you could ask the real people of Gander one question after seeing this show, what would it be?
- What's one small act of kindness from the play that you'd want to bring into your own life or community?



EXTENSION ACTIVITY

- If you have time, as an extension activity, look at the following two speeches. One is given by President Bush, the second is given by Osama Bin Laden.
- While you are reading the two speeches, think about the following questions:

What do both people decide to highlight? What do they leave out? What are some of the things that they state that support their viewpoints? Compare and contrast the two speeches.

- Statements by both President Bush and Osama bin Laden



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APPENDIX 1: ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Students Name _____ Name of Person you are interviewing _____

Directions: To better understand both Oral History as well as the process that the authors of *Come From Away* (Irene Sankoff and David Hien) conducted, please interview a family member about their experiences of 9/11. Please be respectful and take detailed notes as you will share the key information with your classmates.

Where were you living on September 11, 2001? How old were you? What was your normal routine like? _____

How did your day start on September 11, 2001? _____

How did your day end? _____

Where were you when you heard about the attacks? How did you hear about the news? _____

Were you worried about anything specific that day – family, friends, etc.? Did you know anyone on the planes? _____

What do you remember about the days right after 9/11? What changed? What stayed the same? _____

What did you notice about how people treated each other differently – More kindness? More suspicion? With more fear? _____

How did air travel, security, or anything else change after the attacks? _____

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How do you think the attacks changed the country? You personally? _____

How did members of your community support each other on 9/11 or afterward? _____

Is there a moment, image, or sound from that time that has stayed with you after all these years? _____

What do you want my generation to know about the attacks that you can't get from a textbook? _____

Is there anything about 9/11 that you think gets misunderstood or forgotten today? _____

If the person you are interviewing was not in the US or was too young to remember the attacks, please substitute some of these questions for the previous ones so that the practice of oral history can still be done.

What did you learn about 9/11 growing up? From school? Social media/movies? Family? _____

How was 9/11 talked about as you grew up? In your family? Elsewhere? _____

What questions do you still have about that day? _____

APPENDIX 2: TIMELINE OF 9/11 AND THE FOLLOWING DAYS

Tuesday, September 11, 2001

- **7:59 AM:** American Airlines Flight 11 takes off from Boston. Its destination is L.A.
- **8:14 AM:** United Airline Flight 175 takes off from Boston. Its destination is L.A.
- **8:19 AM:** Crew aboard American Airlines Flight 11 lets ground personnel know that the plane has been hijacked. American Airlines notifies the FBI.
- **8:20 AM:** American Airlines Flight 77 takes off from D.C. Its destination is L.A.
- **8:46 AM:** American Airlines Flight 11 crashes into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.
- **8:50 AM:** White House Chief of Staff notifies President George W. Bush that a plane has hit the World Trade Center. President Bush is visiting an elementary school and reading a book to elementary students in Florida at the time.
- **9:02 AM:** An evacuation order is given for the South Tower of the World Trade Center.
- **9:03 AM:** United Airlines 175 hits the South Tower.
- **9:26 AM:** Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) closes air traffic in the United States, diverting over 4,000 planes to land at the nearest airport. All international flights are diverted to Canada. The order for all aircraft to land comes 19 minutes later at 9:45 AM.
- **9:37 AM:** Flight 77 crashes into the Pentagon.
- **9:59 AM:** The South Tower of the World Trade Center collapses.
- **10:28 AM:** The North Tower of the World Trade Center collapses.
- **12:00 PM:** Gander International Airport is told that 18 planes are landing in their airfield.
- **12:15 PM:** Another 13 planes land at Gander International Airport.
- **4:30 PM:** A total of 6,579 individuals land in Gander, which has a population of 10,000.

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- **5:17 PM:** The “come from aways” are allowed to disembark from the plane.
 - It’s been 5 hours since they landed and were stuck on the tarmac with almost no information about what was happening.
 - Throughout the evening, they are taken to schools, Salvation Armies, homes, and more.
- **8:30 PM:** President Bush declares that the United States and its allies would fight the war against terrorism.

Almost 3,000 crew members and travelers on all flights, workers at the Pentagon, and police and firefighters would die in or as a result of the attacks.

Thursday, September 13, 2001

- **12:00 PM:** The first planes are given clearance to take off from Gander.

Sunday, September 16, 2001

- **1:00 PM:** The final “come from aways” depart from Gander.



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