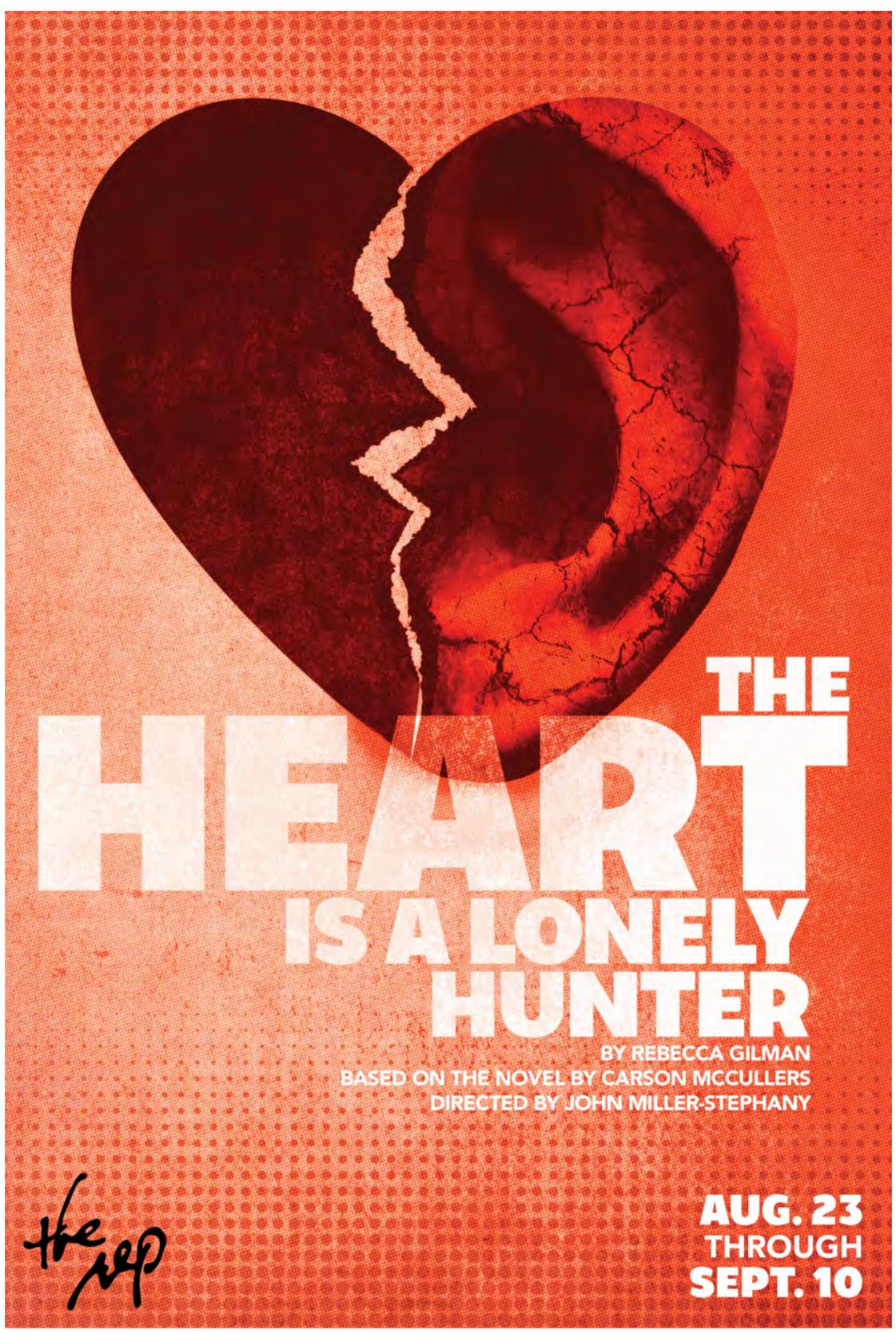


ARKANSAS REPERTORY THEATRE



**Study Guide**  
Prepared by Robert Neblett  
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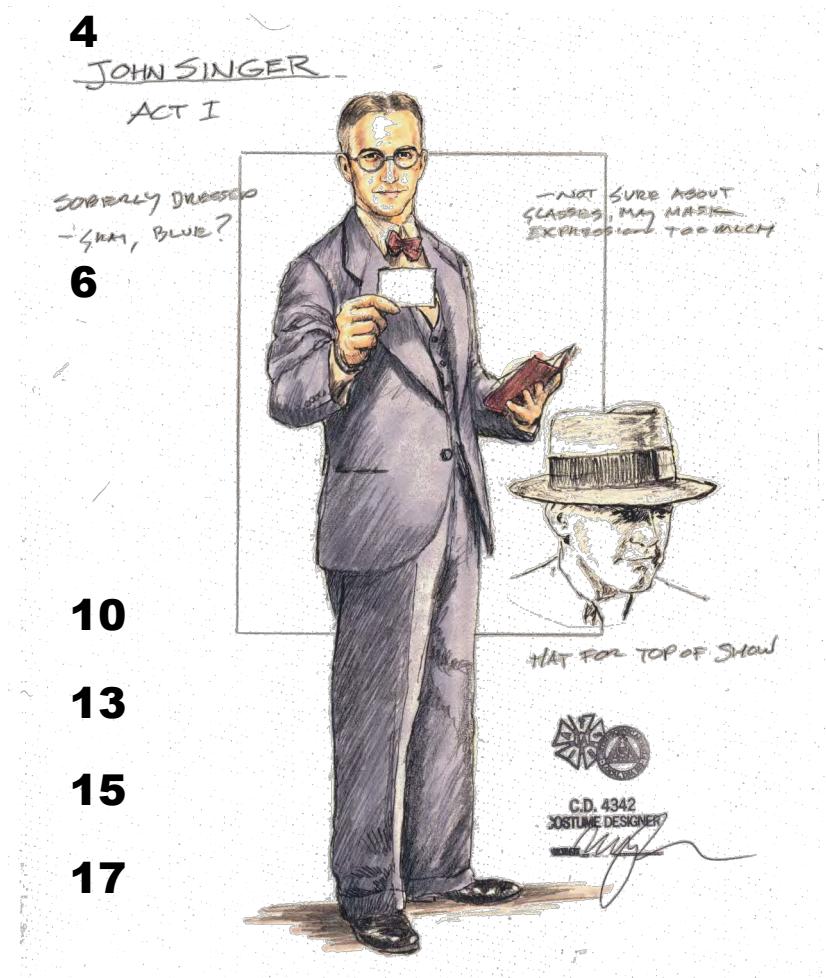
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Costumes designed by  
Mathew J. LeFebvre

## NOTE FOR EDUCATORS:

Throughout this Study Guide you will find words, names and phrases in **bold type**. These items are key terms and phrases to a better understanding of the world and context of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. These items are suggestions for further research and study among your students, both before and after you attend the performance at The Rep.

# INTRODUCTION

*“The most fatal thing a man can do is try to stand alone.”*

In Carson McCullers’ iconic 1940 novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, we are introduced to a handful of misfits in a small Georgia community in the latter years of the **Great Depression**. Each experiences a loneliness and isolation he or she cannot name, until John Singer, a Deaf man, enters their midst. One by one, each confides in Singer their deepest desires and darkest fears. Even though Singer cannot hear them, they find solace in these **confessionals**.

McCullers is one of a group of Southern American writers whose works demystify the mythic idealism of the genteel South, instead depicting its practices and traditions as decaying and fraught with hidden violence. At the heart of this portrayal is a yearning for truth, no matter how harsh or dangerous.

The Arkansas Repertory Theatre is proud to open its 2017-18 Season with Rebecca Gilman’s theatrical adaptation of McCullers’ novel, which emphasizes the need for all members of a community to pull together, truly listen to each other, and find a common ground upon which to stand.

We hope that educators and students will use this Study Guide to delve deeper into the significance of this poignant drama, not only in its historical and literary sense, but also in its message of compassion for with all people, from all walks of life.



# CHARACTERS

John Singer: a **Deaf** man who works as an engraver in a local jeweler's shop; a very kind and generous man who becomes a sounding board for some of the troubled misfits in his community

Spiros Antonopoulos: a Deaf man of Greek descent who has been Singer's best friend for ten years; he is sent to live in a mental hospital when his cousin cannot control his behavior

Charles Parker: Antonopoulos's cousin, owns a fruit store; sends Antonopoulos to live in the state asylum

Mick Kelly: young girl of 13, her father owns the local **boarding house** where Singer lives; she is a restless **tomboy** who loves classical music and dreams of a better, more adventurous life

Mr. Kelly: Mick's father, runs a watch repair service and rents rooms in his house to **boarders**; a kind man who used to be a carpenter until he was injured in an accident

Harry Minowitz: a thoughtful sixteen-year-old neighbor of Mick's; he and Mick lose their innocence with each other

Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland: the local African-American doctor, father to Portia and Willie, as well as his other two sons Karl Marx and Hamilton (who are unseen characters); he is working himself into an early grave; the injustices and cruelty towards African-Americans moves him to fits of righteous anger

Portia: Dr. Copeland's daughter and sister to Willie, she works as a maid at the Kellys; she is married to Highboy (an unseen character); she is very protective of her family; she befriends Mick and gives her advice

Willie: Portia's brother, who works in Biff's New York Café; later goes to prison for getting in a knife fight at a local **bordello**; in prison, he is tortured and mutilated

Jake Blount: a boisterous drunkard who is violently consumed with preaching the principles of **communism** and encouraging local mill workers to form a **workers' unions**

Biff Brannon: owner of a diner, the New York Café; his wife Alice has just passed away at the beginning of the play; he has a habit of carefully watching others

Preacher: named Simms in the novel (but unnamed in the play), he is an “**end times**” fanatic who believes the world is coming to an end soon; he scrawls religious **graffiti** on the town's walls; becomes an object of Jake's fascination

Various Mill Workers, Deputies, Hospital Attendants, and Patients

## Setting

*Time*: Summer of 1938 through late spring of 1939

*Place*: A small mill city in Georgia

# SYNOPSIS

## Act One

John Singer, a Deaf man, and his best friend of ten years, Spiros Antonopoulos, live together until Spiros falls ill and is admitted to a nearby **asylum**. Singer moves into a room at the Kellys' boarding house, where he meets the owner's tomboy daughter, Mick. At the town café, the owner Biff Brannon and his dishwasher Willie encounter Jake Blount, an inebriated drifter with revolutionary ideas. After Jake passes out drunk, Singer takes him to his room to recover, and the two share a moment of camaraderie. Portia, the Kellys' maid, catches Mick sneaking out of the house to listen to the radios of the wealthy citizens on the other side of town. Biff visits Singer at the **boarding house**. Portia visits Dr. Copeland, her father, and they argue. Singer tries to teach Mick chess, and she confesses her love for classical music to him. Dr. Copeland confesses his mistreatment of his family to Singer. Jake attempts to interest the local millworkers and some of his coworkers at the local carnival in joining him for a **union rally** but they just mock him and his ideas. After Willie has been arrested for getting in a knife fight, Portia asks her father for help. Biff attempts to persuade Jake to quit his job at the carnival and work at the café. Willie is sentenced to hard labor at the state penitentiary. At Christmas, Singer buys a radio for his guests, but especially for Mick. Portia worries because Willie hasn't written to her after he is transferred to a **chain gang**. Singer visits Antonopoulos in the State Mental Hospital, bringing a film projector and a "Popeye" filmstrip. Singer and Antonopoulos share a moment of happiness together watching the cartoon.

## Act Two

Jake, Biff, Dr. Copeland, and Mick are gathered in Singer's room after he returns from the hospital, but they are not used to being together - they crave their moments of privacy with John. Mick and Harry begin to flirt as they do homework together. Mr. Kelly asks Mick to help him with the wording for a sign advertising his watch repair business. Jake approaches a Preacher who has been scrawling Bible verses on walls around town, but the two violently clash. Singer agrees to co-sign a bank loan with Mr. Kelly to help get the family through a rough financial spell. Portia tells Dr. Copeland that she has learned that Willie was tortured in prison and had to have his feet cut off due to a **gangrene** infection. Biff warns Jake against handing out union tracts at the carnival. Portia and Dr. Copeland argue in the Kellys' kitchen about the appropriate way to seek justice for what happened to Willie. Copeland goes to the court house, where he is beaten by two deputies. Harry and Mick have a picnic outside of town and lose their innocence. Frightened, Harry decides to leave town. Singer loans Portia some money to bring Dr. Copeland home, and Jake schemes to use Willie's injuries for his own social agenda. Mick nervously waits for Singer to appear in the café, but he never arrives. Copeland refuses Jake's plan to use Willie as a prop for his political purposes and instead formulates a plan of his own to lead a protest march of African-Americans in Washington, DC. Mick decides to take a job at the local **Woolworth's**, but it requires her to drop out of school. Singer visits the mental hospital, only to discover that Antonopoulos has died from **nephritis**. Grief stricken, he returns home and shoots himself. At Singer's funeral, the other characters begin to realize how many lives the Deaf man touched. Because of his failing health and financial situation, Copeland is forced to move to his late wife's family's farm. Biff warns Jake to leave town before he is arrested. Mick enters the café, and Biff realizes her spark of youth has been extinguished when she asks him to turn off the radio. Biff opens Singer's letters and learns about Singer's true feelings towards him, Mick, Copeland, and Jake, and begins to understand the dead man's depths of loneliness.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR: CARSON McCULLERS

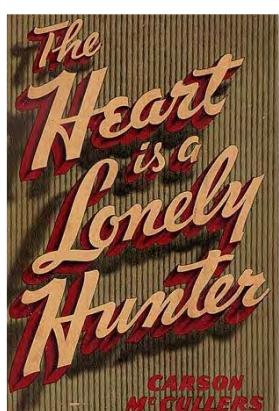


Born Lula Carson Smith in 1917, Carson McCullers spent the first seventeen years of her life in Columbus, Georgia, the daughter of a jeweler. She trained to be a pianist and left home in 1934 to attend a prestigious music school in New York City. Illness brought her back home to Georgia, but she returned to New York to study writing at Columbia University and New York University.

After publishing her first short story in 1936, she focused her attention on writing what would eventually become *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. In 1937, she married aspiring writer Reeves McCullers, beginning a tumultuous relationship that resulted in divorce in 1941 and remarriage in 1945. Both she and Reeves were involved in a number of love affairs, and they shared crippling bouts of clinical depression. She attempted suicide in 1948, and Reeves ultimately killed himself in 1953.



Carson and Reeves McCullers



In 1940, she published *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and instantly became the toast of New York literary society. Although her next novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, was not as successful as her debut work, she soon gained additional recognition with the publication of *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951). She developed friendships with literary giants such as W. H. Auden, Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams. She later distanced herself from Capote when she suspected that he had plagiarized some of her work (a sentiment shared by *To Kill a Mockingbird* author Harper Lee).

She adapted *The Member of the Wedding* into a successful Broadway play in 1950, which was subsequently made into a celebrated film in 1952. *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was adapted for the stage by playwright **Edward Albee** in 1953, and later made into the 1991 Merchant Ivory film.

Plagued by bad health since her youth, McCullers died after suffering a stroke that left her in a coma for over a month in 1967, the year before the film version of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* was released.



Julie Harris, Ethel Waters and Brandan De Wilde in *The Member of the Wedding* (1952 Film)



Christopher Tester as John Singer and James Foster Jr. as Dr. Copeland in The Rep's production of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

Photo by John David Pittman.

# McCULLERS AND *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER*

McCullers published *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* when she was only 23 years old. The original name of the novel was *The Mute*, but she changed it at the suggestion of an editor at the Houghton Mifflin publishing house. An early draft of the novel featured the main characters' stories being shared with Harry Minowitz, but then McCullers came up with the idea of the John Singer character, which transformed both the story and its themes.

"For a whole year I worked on *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* without understanding it at all. Each character was talking to a central character, but why, I didn't know. I'd almost decided that the book was no novel, that I should chop it up into short stories. But I could feel the mutilation in my body when I had that idea, and I was in despair. I had been working for five hours and I went outside. Suddenly, as I walked across a road, it occurred to me that Harry Minowitz, the character all the other characters were talking to, was a different man, a deaf-mute, and immediately the name was changed to John Singer. The whole focus of the novel was fixed and I was for the first time committed with my whole soul to *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*."

From "The Flowering Dream," *Esquire* (December 1959)

McCullers considered tomboy Mick Kelly to be the most autobiographical character she ever wrote. Mick's isolation and disconnection with the people and the town around her mirror McCullers' own listlessness as a young woman, the wanderlust that drove her to leave Georgia at 17 for New York City. She always considered this to be a distinctly

American trait:



"It is a curious emotion, this certain homesickness I have in mind. With Americans, it is a national trait, as native to us as the rollercoaster or the jukebox. It is no simple longing for the home town or country of our birth. The emotion is Janus-faced: we are torn between a nostalgia for the familiar and an urge for the foreign and strange. As often as not, we are homesick most for the places we have never known."

From "Look Homeward, Americans," *Vogue* (December 1, 1940)

Carson McCullers

With the publication of the novel in 1940, she became an overnight literary sensation and eventually published a series of short stories, novels, and plays that brought her fame and acclaim. Social critics have hailed the book as a sensitive, insightful representation of the simmering racial tensions that led to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, as well as a skillful psychological study of Southerners in the years between World War I and World War II. Playwright Tennessee Williams hailed McCullers as "The greatest prose writer that the South produced."

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* was adapted into a film in 1968, the year after McCullers' death. The theatrical version by Rebecca Gilman was commissioned by The Acting Company and premiered in 2005 at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta. This dramatization was later produced Off-Broadway at the New York Theatre Workshop in 2009.

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* has been named among the Top 100 books of the 20th century by both The Modern Library and *TIME* Magazine, as well as being featured as a selection in Oprah's Book Club in 2004.



Christopher Tester as John Singer and  
Madeline Adelle Phillips as Mick Kelly in The Rep's  
production of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

Photo by John David Pittman.

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: REBECCA GILMAN

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is a 2005 theatrical **adaptation** of the Carson McCullers novel of the same name. The **playwright** who took the original source material and transformed it into a drama for the stage is Rebecca Gilman, one of America's leading dramatists. In addition to being an Artistic Associate at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, she teaches dramatic writing at Northwestern University. Ms. Gilman is the recipient of major theatre awards and has been a finalist for the **Pulitzer Prize** for Drama.

Gilman's other major works include:



*The Glory of Living* (1996): a play about a 15-year-old girl, married to a criminal twice her age, who is coerced into committing a series of crimes with him

*Spinning Into Butter* (1999): a play about a college administrator caught in a web of political correctness and racial politics on a New England campus

*Boy Gets Girl* (2000): a play about a blind date gone terribly wrong that turns into a nightmare of stalking and the darkest excesses of the human heart

*Dollhouse* (2005): a modernized adaptation of **Henrik Ibsen**'s classic feminist work ***A Doll's House***, set in the upper middle-class world of contemporary Chicago

*Luna Gale* (2014): a play about a social worker who finds a new home for a baby born into neglect, but later discovers that the placement may have been unsound

While Gilman is known primarily as a Chicago artist, she was born in Birmingham, Alabama. This background has made her very aware of the connections between wealth and social status, a prominent theme in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. In a 2014 interview with *Ms. Magazine*, she reflects:

"I think in terms of my town, we were well off. And then for high school, my parents sent us to a private school in Birmingham. And suddenly we went from being the sort of well-off people in this small town to being the poor kids from the sticks in the private school. So I think I have always been aware of how money gives you status in our country and it's sort of easily won or lost."

In 2008, she was given the Harper Lee Award, named after the acclaimed author of the groundbreaking 1960 novel ***To Kill a Mockingbird*** which recognizes "the lifetime achievement of a writer who was born in Alabama or who spent his or her formative years living and writing in the state."

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* was selected as one of *Time Magazine's* Top Ten Plays of 2009

Gilman's characters are imperfect and driven by conflicting motivations, making them incredibly complex and difficult to place as stereotypical characters. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, we see the characters who gravitate to John Singer (and Singer himself) through this distinctive lens, which owes as much to Gilman as to McCullers. In that same 2014 interview, Gilman describes her method of writing characters:

"I feel like in our culture, we set people up as these sort of heroic overachievers—or people who are saints and completely selfless. And I don't think anyone is that. I think that everybody is flawed. A lot of people do the best they can to help people. But it's difficult. You get in your own way, and you get tired and you get mad and you get frustrated."

I just think it's much more interesting to look at how flawed and complex people are. Like the Marvel comics kind of get it right in a weird way because all the superheroes have some weird problem. I mean, they at least acknowledge the Incredible Hulk has a real rage problem."

# ABOUT THE DIRECTOR: JOHN MILLER-STEHANY

This year marks the first full season that Arkansas Repertory Theatre audiences will share with new Producing Artistic Director John Miller-Stephany. We asked John to share some of his thoughts about why he chose *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* as the play that marks his directorial debut with the company.

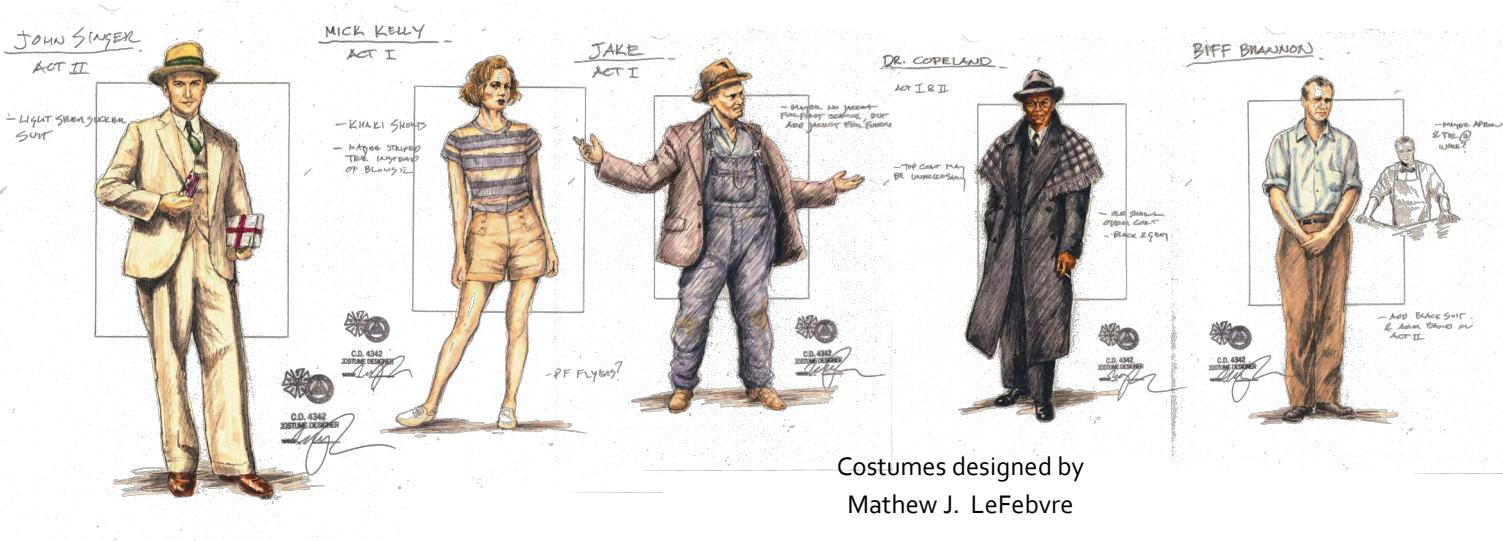


Although I've lived in the South for just ten months, I've been a lifelong fan of Southern writers. So, when considering how to launch my first season to program at Arkansas Repertory Theatre, it seemed highly appropriate to begin 2017-2018 with a Southern story. I was drawn to Rebecca Gilman's wonderful adaptation of Carson McCullers's celebrated debut novel for a variety of reasons: Gilman faithfully retains the novel's tender portrayal of a handful of "eccentrics" in a small Georgia mill town in the late 1930s, but she adds a vivid theatricality all of her own; the various storylines in the play move forward independently and then connect gracefully on stage just as they do in the novel; and most of all, I was taken by the relevancy of the themes which occur frequently in McCullers' works.

In McCullers' *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING* (1946), the twelve-year old tomboy Frankie Addams longs to find the "we of me." Similarly, in *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER*, Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Dr. Copeland and Jake Blount yearn to find their "we of me." Each of the four, in their own way and for their own reasons, feels isolated and marginalized. In their search to establish a meaningful connection they become drawn to John Singer, a deeply compassionate and generous deaf man, who likewise feels a crippling loneliness. The difference is that Singer has already found his "we of me:" his friend Spiros Antonopoulos, the only other deaf citizen in town. Antonopoulos, a childlike man who becomes mentally unstable, is institutionalized by his unsympathetic cousin, leaving Singer alone. Now adrift in a community that holds little appeal for him, Singer becomes a confidant to Mick, Biff, Dr. Copeland and Jake. His kindness is a balm that soothes their aches, but their pleasant companionship doesn't begin to heal the hole in Singer's heart. (In McCullers' view, the act of loving is a much more life-affirming condition than that of being loved.)

McCullers also suggests that there exists in genuine curiosity an inherent kindness. Biff bemoans his late wife's habit of passing judgement on others, and prides himself on studying people — not in order to size them up, but in order to understand them better.

Although our present-day world is quite different from the world depicted in *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER*, the various motifs of the story remain as relevant as ever: the smallest act of kindness can have the most profound effect; listening (even if you can't quite hear) is a significant act of compassion; sympathy is laudable, but empathy is profoundly more important.



Costumes designed by  
Mathew J. LeFebvre

# ABOUT THE ACTOR: CHRISTOPHER TESTER

We asked the actor playing John Singer in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Christopher Tester, to share his thoughts about the role with Little Rock audiences. Here are his reflections on preparing for his role, the importance of the story, and the community of misfits of which we all belong.



**Christopher Tester\*** (John Singer) is thrilled to be a part of a wonderful company and production. Regional: *Fiddler on the Roof* (Perchik, Lyric Theatre of Oklahoma). Off-Broadway: *Twelfth Night* (Public Works); Off-Off Broadway: *Captive Audience* (variety of characters; New York Deaf Theatre); *Beyond Therapy* (Bruce; New York Deaf Theatre); *Sign Me Alice* (Mark; New York Deaf Theatre); *ASL Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Brad; New York Deaf Theatre); Performing Arts: *Face Opera II* (Calder Foundation: New York; Carroll/Fletcher: London). BSL consultant: Constellations (Manhattan Theatre Club); Hyperglot (short film).

## What were your first impressions when you read the script for *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*?

I read the book first, before the play, and my first impression was, wow, this is such a positive portrayal of a Deaf person. Today, “Deaf-dumb” or “Deaf-mute” is offensive and misleading, so whenever I see these terms in the book or the play, initially I cringed. But once I got beyond that and explored the heart of the story and I realized that it was about each individual’s loneliness and wanting to be a part of something, while at the same time trying to maintain their own **status quo**. Maintaining within each character’s comfort zone, with occasional stepping outside of that comfort and into the unknown. As for Mr. Singer, he is portrayed in a very positive light, which is very difficult to find in literature, especially when written by someone who is not deaf. However, he has suffered tragedy in his life, in the play and before the story started... and it’s not because he is deaf, and that’s what makes his story beautiful.

## Describe the audition process for this role.

For the audition, I focused on the emotional depth of my three **sides**, one of them was my closing **monologue** of the play for John Singer. That monologue has a story within that gave me an insight to who he was. By focusing on the loss of his friend. While in this story, it was about losing his friend, but I imagined it was more about losing his world, his love, his family, losing everyone he knows, and being alone. I focused on that emotion and tried to deliver it. However, I was very nervous, and my audition was on my lunch break between two assignments (I am also a sign language interpreter) and was running all over the city. So I had to tell myself to calm down, and forget that I have to run to my next assignment and be present, be here for the audition and not get distracted.

## How do you approach developing a character like John Singer in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*? Is your process for creating this role different than how you have prepared for other roles?

I think about the period, since this is set in the 1930’s, I researched how Deaf people signed back then. Like English, **American Sign Language** has evolved tremendously since then. A few **ASL** features that didn’t emerge back then was the use of directional signs which is a staple part of ASL today. It’s hard to give an example in writing, but there were some things that I had to pay attention to and ensure that each word is emphasized rather than compound them into one sign. I also researched a bit about Deaf schools in Illinois and found some information about Deaf schools in Georgia (even though John didn’t go to school in Georgia).

## ABOUT THE ACTOR: CHRISTOPHER TESTER

### How important is it for a Deaf actor to play this role? Why?

I think it's so important for a Deaf actor to play John Singer, because for one, it is not about being Deaf, but having a lifetime experience of living in the world as a Deaf person, there are so many nuances that a person who can hear can easily not notice. Additionally, an average hearing person often views Deaf as a disability, as someone who is "broken" or not whole and that is not the approach for John Singer. Also, I have to truly lip-read my cast members, especially when we are having a real dialogue, so my reactions are more genuine following what I truly can understand and what I cannot, based on lip-reading, and incorporate that with what John Singer could lip-read and cannot lip-read. It's a very interesting challenge. However, in the final product, you will hopefully see a much more nuanced character who happens to be deaf. I can focus on being John Singer, and not focus on how to be "deaf," in addition to producing a natural ASL rendition, rather than someone who learned specific signs for the role, which more often than not does not look natural.

**In recent years, public figures like Nyle DiMarco, Marlee Matlin, Russell Harvard, the actors in ABC Family's *Switched at Birth* and the actors in Deaf West's recent Broadway musicals, have increased awareness of Deaf culture in entertainment and popular culture. What is it like being a Deaf actor in the entertainment industry in 2017? What do you think could be done to increase acceptance of Deaf people in today's political and cultural landscape?**

It's quite challenging. Most casting and directors focus on only casting deaf if the character is actually deaf, but rarely does the industry go further and just cast deaf because he or she is a fantastic actor. But even then, there are still so many characters that were designated to be deaf and yet cast with an actor who can hear, which further limits our opportunities. I guess it is somewhat similar to some controversies in the past about how Hollywood is whitewashing some characters, except the difference is that it is a hearing person playing deaf, but pretending to be deaf, rather than turning that deaf character hearing. I think if we can continue to be open minded and creative in how to work together to create art, to create theatre, then we will have a far more accessible art for everyone, not for the select few. Diversity in the arts truly brings in our community. This is why I am thrilled that our director, John, decided to cast both deaf characters in this story with deaf actors despite the script suggesting to cast hearing actors. It brings authenticity and broader perspective to our work. The discussion that happens while each one of us develop our character helps to create a multi layered story that *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is presenting. The same can be done in movies, and musicals. Sometimes we can change one slight detail, add a deaf or two deaf actors, and the story changes a bit. Take *Fiddler on the Roof* as an example. Nothing in it is about Deaf or ASL, however, you cast Perchik and Hodel as Deaf, now it becomes a sweet love story of two deaf individuals within the whole story of the Jewish history. **[Note:** Christopher recently played Perchik in Lyric Theatre of Oklahoma's production of *Fiddler*.] It's fun and beautiful.

**The play is written from Singer's perspective, even giving him the drama's opening and closing monologues. This is a shift from the novel's third-person narrative point of view. Why do you think the playwright chose to filter the action through Singer's eyes, rather than, say, Mick's?**

Great question, I wondered about that too, and I think using this strategy, it allows John Singer to have a "voice" in the story, since throughout the whole show, he is a "passive" receiver of the four other principal character's stories, but he never shares his perspective, his feelings and thoughts. So by opening and closing, it allows the audience to glimpse into his world as a lonely heartbroken Deaf man. Throughout the show, he deflects any personal questions directed at him, so his monologue allows him to share his story.

## ABOUT THE ACTOR: CHRISTOPHER TESTER

### What are some of the most challenging roles you have played?

I think this role is by far the most challenging. I am generally a very happy and social person. I do blend in fairly well in both deaf and hearing world. I have a wonderful family back in Vermont who signs, learned to sign when they realized I was Deaf (they are hearing). I also work as an interpreter, and my primary focus is to ensure successful communication. So, it's a challenge to find that deep and dark place within me and bring that out every day. I think my other difficult but fun role was playing Perchik in *Fiddler on the Roof*. I had to learn how to dance and sing (in ASL) within 2 weeks then go on stage and perform. It was my first musical ever, so I had to learn all of these new skills and make sure that my timing matched the orchestra and my singing voice. I was scared and nervous, but it was an amazing experience.

### What do you hope Rep audiences will take away from this production?

I do hope that the audience will recognize that deep down, we are all the same, we have the same basic human need, that is to connect with another, regardless of our race, language and/or identity. I know that most people often think of deaf as a disability, but it isn't, not in this story, nor is it in my own personal life. It is my identity, part of who I am, and that's something I would never want to change. And I believe that is something that John Singer wanted as well.

### What advice do you have for young actors who would like to have a career in the theatre?

My biggest advice would be to just continue to be creative, not every project has to be a big hit. Become involved with a small theatre company and take on different roles than just being an actor, but at the same time reach out to other theatre, work with different people, expand yourself and finally, just have fun.

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## History of Deaf Theatre

Following the 1959 Broadway success of *The Miracle Worker*, William Gibson's play about Helen Keller and her teacher Annie Sullivan, members of the production's creative team began to fundraise and plan for a formal theatre company for Deaf performing artists. In 1967, The National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) opened and has been active in performing, educating, and advocating for Deaf representation in the arts for the past 50 years. In the 1970s, The Little Theatre of the Deaf was started by *Sesame Street* actor Linda Bove; it serves as the children's/family theatre wing of NTD's artistic programming. In 1980, *Children of a Lesser God*, Mark Medoff's play about the contentious relationship between a Deaf woman and the teacher who encourages her to abandon her reclusive lifestyle, opened on Broadway, winning the Tony Awards for Best Actor in a Play and Best Play. The drama was later adapted into a 1986 film featuring Deaf actor Marlee Matlin in her debut role, which won her the Best Actress Academy Award. In 1989, Deaf West Theatre in Los Angeles was founded and has since become a national voice for Deaf artists, developing a unique style of performance that merges Deaf actors with hearing actors in plays and musicals, including productions of Sam Shepard's *True West*, an adaptation of *Flowers for Algernon*, and Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, as well as revivals of *Big River* and *Spring Awakening*, both of which were performed to critical and audience acclaim on Broadway. In 2010, Nina Raine's play *Tribes* opened in London and subsequently transferred Off-Broadway in 2012. *Tribes* deals with the conflicting perspectives within the Deaf community about the potentially alienating effects of learning sign language rather than lip-reading and learning to vocalize speech.

#### **Find out more online:**

National Theatre of the Deaf: [www.ntd.org](http://www.ntd.org)

Deaf West Theatre: <http://www.deafwest.org>

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* was written in 1940, author Carson McCullers addressed many relevant contemporary social issues as her characters confronted social injustices and cultural trends of the day. Looking back at the novel from the present day, readers are able to use this fictional work as a valuable historical artifact that reveals not only the events of the late 1930s in the South, but also the intensely human reactions to how they affected people's everyday lives.

The two greatest influences on the Southern economy, which in turn determined the quality of life for Southerners, in the early 20th century were the **Stock Market Crash of 1929** and the **boll weevil** infestation that began in 1910 and lasted well into the 1920s. This latter occurrence, combined with historic **droughts**, crippled the South's **agriculture** (in particular, cotton and peanut crops). These social catastrophes resulted in a great **migration** from rural farms to larger urban areas, resulting in the growth of the mill and factory industries as well as the population boom in major Southern cities. John Steinbeck's classic 1939 novel ***The Grapes of Wrath***, and the 1940 film starring Henry Fonda, deals with the exodus of an Oklahoma farm family in the disastrous wake of the Dust Bowl.



The **Great Depression**, caused by the 1929 Wall Street Crash, decimated the American economy and workforce, leading to a 20% unemployment rate in 1932 (1 in 5 workers without jobs). This fueled anti-immigrant and racist sentiments in predominantly white communities which in turn added to the overwhelming migration to cities. **Bread lines** and **soup kitchens** were established to feed the hungry, as homelessness became a more familiar sight. Those who were able to find work were routinely abused and cheated by their employers, leading to the establishment of **trade unions** that held **work strikes** designed to pressure bosses to contractually obligate themselves to fair wages and increased safety measures. Many of these trade unions were inspired by the **Bolshevik Revolution** in Russia and adopted **socialist** and **communist** political leanings. **Capitalist** industry leaders used **nationalistic** "pro-America" **propaganda** to attempt to stifle some of these union activities, which led to **anti-interventionist** movements when World War II began in Europe in 1939.

As the Great Depression and its effects on the average American worsened, some Christian leaders attempted to use this downturn in the nation's fortunes as an opportunity to add numbers to their church rolls. They blamed the Depression on depravity and excess, claiming that it was God's punishment on a wicked nation. Many preachers traveled the country holding **tent revivals** and exhorting their followers to cling to the fundamental teachings of the **"Old Time Religion."** This view of Christianity rejected advances in science, an example of which is the **Scopes Monkey Trial** of 1925, upon which the play ***Inherit the Wind*** (1955) was based. Often these sermons took on a violent streak, claiming with **apocalyptic** fervor that the **"end times"** were near and that God's punishment would worsen as **Judgment Day** approached. Several **eschatological** preachers even predicted specific dates for the end of the world, none of which came to pass.



## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Racial tensions increased along with financial hardships during the 1930s. While White Americans were experiencing unemployment rates of approximately 20%, almost half of African-Americans were out of work during the Great Depression. “**Jim Crow**” laws throughout the South favored segregation in education and employment, as well as in social settings. Separate drinking fountains and waiting rooms for whites and blacks were common, as were “White-only” business establishments. These businesses would employ African-American workers for abusive bottom-dollar wages, but would not serve them as patrons. In fact, some black musical artists found themselves headlining in white hotel clubs, but were unable to actually sleep in those same hotel’s rooms. Public lynchings increased, although membership in the **Ku Klux Klan (KKK)** decreased sharply in the 1930s. One of the most famous cases of racial injustice occurred in the early 1930s as the “**Scottsboro Boys**” of Alabama were falsely accused of raping two women; their case led to landmark rulings dealing with jury discrimination and fair legal representation for defendants, regardless of color. During this period as well, the political affiliations in the nation began to shift, with Southern **Democrats** feeling abandoned by their counterparts in the North, leading to the growth of the **Republican Party** in the South whose influence is still felt today. Many of the trade unions, such as the **American Federation of Labor (AFL)**, were infiltrated with racist propaganda, but the **Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO)** sought to recruit black workers and in the process became a vital part of the early **Civil Rights Movement**.

One of the most popular pastimes of Americans seeking escape from the Depression was motion pictures. While these films were first developed in the late 1800s, they began to surpass radio in the late 1920s when the first “**talkies**” premiered. The advent of sound in film is credited with Hollywood’s survival through the Depression. In addition to feature-length motion pictures, **newsreels**, serial dramas (complete with weekly **cliffhangers**), and animation shorts were regularly shown in conjunction with longer films. Of these cartoons, the most popular series in the 1930s was **Popeye**, adapted by Max Fleischer from the **Thimble Theatre** comic strip. The title character, a salty sailor with a penchant for spinach, would often appear alongside other notable animated characters such as **Betty Boop**, when he wasn’t fighting his **nemesis** Bluto over the love of Olive Oyl.



Betty Boop and Popeye



American School for the Deaf

Many Deaf Americans, like John Singer in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, were educated in schools for the Deaf. Deaf education in America was established in the early 1800s and strongly advocated the use of **manualism**, or sign language. However, after the Civil War, these schools increasingly changed their methodologies to prioritize **oralism**, which encouraged Deaf students to vocalize speech patterns in order to better integrate into “normal” society. As this movement grew, Deaf teachers were replaced by hearing ones, and Deaf students were routinely punished for signing. Despite the number of Deaf Americans who publicly complained of the stunting effects of this educational model, it was not until the 1960s that

American schools for the Deaf began to re-incorporate **American Sign Language (ASL)** into their classrooms. Even so, Deaf educators had to wait until 2013 for the American government to officially recognize ASL and condone its use in schools.

# SOUTHERN GOTHIC LITERATURE

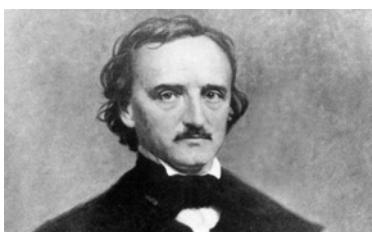
Carson McCullers' work belongs to a **genre** of American writing known as "**Southern Gothic**." Its name is inspired by its debt to **Gothic literature** of the 18th and 19th centuries, which includes novels such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). These works are characterized by a mixture of **melodramatic** plots, forbidden romance, the conflict between science and faith, and an overwhelming sense of terror and dread that is derived from the inclusion of malignant **supernatural** forces and **paranormal** phenomena. They typically are set in ancient buildings with sprawling architecture (hence the "Gothic" aspect), which are often abandoned or in disrepair, full of dark corners, hidden dungeons, and even darker secrets. Gothic literature is a significant precursor to 20th and 21st century horror literature and films, due to its preoccupation with cemeteries and grave robbing; ghosts, vampires, and other inhuman creatures; skeletons and rotting corpses; sickness and insanity; and the suggestion that morality will not always prevail in the world.

Other European and American writers who utilize Gothic **tropes**, but are not considered part of the genre proper, are the Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens (Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*), Robert Louis Stevenson (*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), and Henry James (*The Turn of the Screw*).

The Southern Gothic genre takes many of its cues from these classic stories and novels but transplants them into the setting of the post-Civil War South, replacing cathedrals and castles with plantation houses and churches, and transforming the ghosts and monsters with characters who are remnants of an antiquated way of life. Unlike **Mark Twain**, whose satirical novels poke fun at Southern characters but ultimately overcome their cynicism with humorous admiration, the Southern Gothic writers reject the mystique of Southern society outright.

At its heart, the genre seeks to subvert the mythic nature of the idealized South by exposing its gentility, manners, grace, and pride as fantastic facades that obscure a cruel past and a broken present. While its mood and tone often mirror the traditional Gothic dread and horror, it does so by exploring stories using slavery, racism, and disability (especially mental illness) as metaphors for the corruption at the core of **antebellum** opulence. Not only does the financial trauma of the post-Civil War **Reconstruction** period and the **Great Depression** contribute to the theme of flawed nostalgia in Southern Gothic works; the added guilt and shame of the early years of the **Civil Rights Movement** are a reminder of the South's abuses of African-American slaves.

The primary writers included in the Southern Gothic genre are William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Edgar Allan Poe, Cormac McCarthy, Harper Lee, Truman Capote, and Tennessee Williams. While his Boston roots, subject matter, and settings appear closer to the **uncanny** fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Poe's **macabre** aesthetic lays the foundation for the movement, as well as later detective fiction and science fiction. Flannery O'Connor inserts a humorous female voice into this early stage of Southern Gothic and gleefully plays with **taboo** sexuality and the archetype of the corrupt Christian (e.g., the fraudulent Bible salesman in "Good Country People" [1955]). Tennessee Williams's plays smolder with unrequited lust and a sense of loss that echoes backwards into his turbulent past. Faulkner, who is arguably the master of the genre, offers an **Absurdist** critique (in which the meaningless nature of life and the futility of human action is emphasized), as well as **Joycean** structural experimentation with shifting narrative voices and **free-associative** thought patterns, into a broken world where nobility has been abandoned in favor of a kind of lyrical/poetic **ferality**.



Edgar Allan Poe



Harper Lee



Flannery O'Connor



William Faulkner

# SOUTHERN GOTHIC LITERATURE

Later writers whose work falls into this category include Anne Rice, Charlaine Harris, John Berendt, and Daniel Wallace.

Anne Rice, famous for her *Vampire Chronicles* novels (featuring the bratty vampire prince Lestat de Lioncourt) and the *Lives of the Mayfair Witches* series, firmly sets her novels, their characters, and her artistic sensibilities in the complex history of New Orleans. By doing so, she is able to mix the **pagan** qualities of swamp **voodoo** with the high ceremony of the **ubiquitous** Catholic Church, all the while weaving the international flavor of the city's steamy sensuousness through historical connections to ancient Egypt, Renaissance Italy, 19th-century Paris, and modern-day San Francisco. Her vampires use their powers to claw their way to the top of social ladders and amass untold wealth, while all the way sating their limitless appetites.

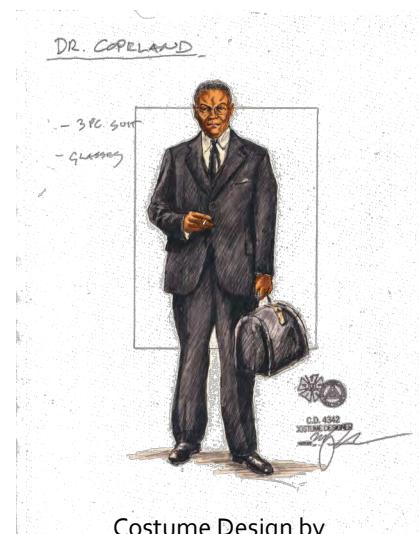
Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, set outside of Shreveport, Louisiana, are the basis for the HBO television series *True Blood*. Other television programs that share Southern Gothic roots are *The Walking Dead* and *Preacher* (both based on graphic novels), and *True Detective*. John Berendt's tawdry 1994 non-fiction book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* lays bare some of the dirtiest laundry in the social circles of Savannah, Georgia, while attempting to solve a murder case; it was later made into a 1997 film starring John Cusack and Kevin Spacey. Daniel Wallace's *Big Fish* (1998) was turned into a major motion picture directed by Tim Burton in 2003, and provides a poignant **object lesson** in the best qualities of the genre, particularly as the main character's son uncovers the stark, painful truths behind his father's constant tall tales ("big fish stories") but finally chooses to embrace the mythic version of his father's life.



Billie Holiday

Another unlikely example of the Southern Gothic **aesthetic** is the 1937 song "Strange Fruit," although its author Abel Meeropol and singer Billie Holiday are both Northern artists. The languid song transposes the sickly decaying smell of swamp flowers such as magnolias and bougainvilleas with the bodies of lynched African Americans hanging from "Southern trees." By portraying these corpses as familiar decorations and a "bitter crop" that has been cultivated by the South's inhabitants, the lyrics expose the casual racism and **systemic** violence that has propped up the South's historic prosperity. And yet, if juxtaposed with the Harlem Renaissance voices of writers like James Baldwin and Langston Hughes, one can infer that this "strange fruit" will cultivate offspring that will rise up against social injustice. Even the song's sluggish tempo and **minor key** note progressions suggest the steamy heat and **lethargy** caused by swampy Southern locales, providing a tonal **metaphor** that adheres strongly to the Southern Gothic **oeuvre**.

While lacking many of the literary excesses of her peers, Carson McCullers' works are firmly rooted in the Southern Gothic category. Her characters are outsiders, misfits: the forgotten and the discarded **detritus** of a society in decline. She deals honestly with racial tensions and unuttered taboos of characters who can no longer live in the past but are incapable of making the transition into the future. Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, Dr. Copeland, and Biff Brannon all clamber to spend time with John Singer, not just because of his kind and generous spirit, but because he offers them an opportunity to speak the unspeakable truths that plague their souls, with no judgment. Dr. Copeland, grappling with the unanswered questions behind Singer's suicide at the end of the novel, asks himself, "And how can the dead be truly dead when they still live in the souls of those who are left behind?" So, while *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* does not embrace the literal supernatural forces that populate the works of Poe, Rice, or Harris, the voices of the dead reverberate through the rural Georgia of McCullers' novel and haunt its characters as surely as any vampire.



Costume Design by  
Mathew J. LeFebvre

# ACTIVITIES

**Family Tree** Some families are biological, made up of blood relatives, and some are “logical,” made up of close friends and co-workers and neighbors, etc., that you choose to be a major part of your life. Make a “logical family” tree of the people who make you feel your most authentic, most comfortable, and most free. Is there a central figure that holds this “logical family” together, like John Singer? Is it you?

**One-Sided Conversation** Divide into pairs. In each pair, one person can speak, and the other can only write down his/her side of the conversation on a piece of paper. Each pair will have a conversation in front of the class about a topic they choose from a hat. The rest of the class must see if they can infer the whole conversation from the one-side spoken clues. One catch: the person who can speak cannot repeat what the other has written; he or she can only respond or begin a new part of the conversation.

**Southern Gothic Writer** Create your own “**Southern Gothic**” story, using the people, places, and things you encounter on a daily basis as the building blocks for the plot, settings, and characters. How would you skew these elements to fit into a Gothic genre, incorporating elements of the supernatural/paranormal, decaying institutions, etc., to expose the **myths** and skeletons in the closets of your world? What elements are distinctly specific to Little Rock or Arkansas?

**Deaf West Theatre** Research the **mission** and **production history** of Deaf West Theatre in Los Angeles, California. Watch videos from the company’s performances on its YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/deafwesttheatre>). What are your expectations of a Deaf theatre company? How does Deaf West challenge those expectations? How would you reinvent a play, book, or movie to include a Deaf cast? Why?



Christopher Tester as John Singer and Gregory Myhre as Biff Brannon in The Rep’s production of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Photo by John David Pittman.

# QUESTIONS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

- Read William Sharp's 1911 poem "The Lonely Hunter" and compare its thematic significance with this quote from McCullers' novel: "The Heart is a lonely hunter with only one desire! To find some lasting comfort in the arms of another's fire...driven by a desperate hunger to the arms of a neon light, the heart is a lonely hunter when there's no sign of love in sight!"

Does the 1911 poem provide any insight into the McCullers quote and/or the play and its characters? Give evidence from each to support your opinion.

Additional Activity: Listen to Reba McEntire's 1994 song "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter" and imagine the woman in the lyrics as a character from the play. Who would it be and why?

- Who is the play's **protagonist**? Explore each character's function in the play before answering who is the main character. What makes a character the central role of a drama or novel? What clues does the author give? How does the audience's emotional connection with an actor's portrayal influence this distinction?

As she was writing the novel, McCullers originally intended Harry Minowitz to be the central character. How would the novel/play be different if Singer were replaced by Harry?

- In 2009, The Acting Company/New York Theater Workshop production of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* drew protests from Deaf activists who were opposed to the casting of a hearing actor in the role of John Singer. Research this **controversy** and discuss the pros and cons of that casting choice with the casting of The Rep's production.
- Compare McCullers' novel with William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. How is John Singer similar to/different from the character of "Benjy" Compson? Do the two novels share any structural similarities?
- In the play, the back wall is almost a character in its own right, as it delivers messages scrawled on it by the Preacher, Jake, and even Mick. How does its function echo that of Singer's in the action and symbolism of the play?
- Explore the **irony** of deaf character Singer providing a listening ear to each of the other main characters in the play. Discuss the ironic quality of his name as well.
- Jake and Copeland and the Preacher each find themselves preaching different gospels throughout *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (**communism**, civil rights, **end times**). Compare and contrast their messages and methods. Which character is the most persuasive and why?



Christopher Tester as John Singer and Lou Sumerall as Jake Blount in

The Rep's production of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

Photo by John David Pittman.

# VOCABULARY

Following are a series of important terms, including names, places, and historical events, that will assist you in your understanding of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Many of these terms can be found in **bold** in the Study Guide. Others are taken directly from the text of the play and can be found using basic research strategies.

<i>A Doll's House</i>	Free-association	Playwright
Absurdism	Gangrene	<i>Popeye</i>
Adaptation	Genre	Production history
Adolf Hitler	Gothic Novel	Propaganda
Aesthetic	Graffiti	Protagonist
Agriculture	Graphic Novel	Pulitzer Prize
Alexander Hamilton	Great Depression	Reconstruction
American Federation of Labor (AFL)	Harper Lee	"Red"
American Sign Language (ASL)	Helen Keller	Regional Theatre
Antebellum	Henrik Ibsen	Republican Party
Anti-interventionist	<i>Inherit the Wind</i>	Rickets
Apocalyptic	Intermission	"Scopes Monkey Trial"
Artistic Director	Irony	"Scottsboro Boys"
Asylum	James Joyce	Segregation
Baruch Spinoza	"Jim Crow"	Sides (for an audition)
Beethoven	Judgment Day	Socialism
Betty Boop	Karl Marx	Soup kitchen
Boarding house	Ku Klux Klan (KKK)	Southern Gothic
Boll Weevil	Labor agitation	Status quo
Bolshevik	Lethargy	Stock Market Crash of 1929
Bordello	Lip-reading	Strike
Bread line	Macabre	Supernatural
Capitalism	Manualism	Systemic
Catholic	Mark Twain	Taboo
Chain gang	Melodrama	"Talkies"
Civil Rights Movement	Metaphor	Tennessee Williams
Civil War	Migration	Tent revival
Cliffhanger	Minor key	Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA)
Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO)	Mission statement	<i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>
Communism	Monologue	<i>Thimble Theatre</i>
Confessional	Mozart	Thorstein Veblen
Democratic Party	Myth	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>
Detritus	Nationalism	Tony Award
Drought	Nazi	Trade union
Dust Bowl	Nemesis	Trope
Economic determinism	Nephritis	Truman Capote
Edgar Allan Poe	Newsreel	Ubiquitous
Edward Albee	Object Lesson	Uncanny
"End times"	Oeuvre	Union rally
Eschatology	"Old Time Religion"	Voodoo
Fascism	Oralism	William Faulkner
Feral	Pagan	Woolworth's
Flannery O'Connor	Paranormal	

# Our Story

Founded in 1976, Arkansas Repertory Theatre is the state's largest not-for-profit professional resident theatre company. A member of the League of Resident Theatres, The Rep has produced more than 350 productions including 45 world premieres in its 377-seat venue located in the historic Galloway building in downtown Little Rock. The Rep relies on income from season subscriptions, special events, foundation support, corporate and individual donations, and national grants, including grants from The Shubert Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

# Our Mission

The mission of The Rep's Education Department is to engage Arkansas students of all ages, encouraging expression, collaboration, creative problem-solving, reflection, and a deeper community connection through involvement in theatre arts. Our mission is realized through student matinees, year-round classes and camps led by our professional faculty, master classes and workshops with guest artists, outreach education, scholarship opportunities and more.

# Contact Information

For questions or comments concerning this production of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* or Arkansas Repertory Theatre, contact our offices at (501) 378-0445.

Additional information may also be found at [TheRep.org](http://TheRep.org).

The Box Office may be reached at (501) 378-0405.

# Education Donors

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## ARKANSAS FINE ARTS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK 2014

Students will perceive and analyze artistic work. R.7.THI.1-5, R.7.THII.1-5, R.7.THIII.1-5:

Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. R.8.THI.1-2, R.8.THII.1-2,

R.8.THIII.1-2

Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. R.9.THI.1-2, R.9.THII.1-2, R.9.THIII.1-2

Students will perceive and analyze artistic work. R.7.TA.1-4

Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. R.8.TA.1-2

Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. R.9.TA.1-2

Students will relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding. CN.11.TA.2-9

Students will perceive and analyze artistic work. R.7.SCI.1-2, R.7.SCII.1-2, R.7.SCIII.1-2

Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. R.8.SCI.1, R.8.SCII.1, R.8.SCIII.1

Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. R.9.SCI.1-2, R.9.SCII.1-2, R.9.SCIII.1-2

Students will relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding. CN.11.SCI.1-9, CN.11.SCII.1-9, CN.11.SCIII.1-9

Students will perceive and analyze artistic work. R.7.2.1, R.7.3.1, R.7.4.1

Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. R.8.2.1-3, R.8.3.1-3, R.8.4.1-3

Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. R.9.2.1, R.9.1.1, R.9.2.1-3, R.9.3.1-3, R.9.4.1-3

Students will perceive and analyze artistic work. R.7.5.1, R.7.6.1, R.7.7.1, R.7.8.1

Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. R.8.5.1-3, R.8.6.1-3, R.8.7.1-3, R.8.8.1-3

Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. R.9.5.1-3, R.9.6.1-3, R.9.7.1-3, R.9.8.1-3

Students will synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

CN.10.5.1, CN.10.6.1, CN.10.7.1, CN.10.8.1

Students will relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding. CN.11.5.2-3, CN.11.6.2-3, CN.11.7.2-3, CN.11.7.2-3, CN.10.8.2-3

## ARKANSAS DRAMATIC LITERATURE CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK 2012

Students will demonstrate understanding of the elements of drama through the study of a variety of dramatic texts. DE.1.DL.1-11