

# ***THE NERD***

by Larry Shue

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## **A Study Guide**

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## **I. THE AUTHOR**

Born in 1946, Larry Shue died in an airplane crash in September, 1985 at the age of 39. A native of New Orleans, Shue graduated in 1968 from Illinois Wesleyan University where he studied theater, and wrote and produced two plays in his senior year. Between 1969 and 1972, Shue served in the United States Army. He remained active in theater during his tour of duty, winning the First Army Entertainment Contest in 1970.

Following his discharge from the Army, he began a career as a professional actor with the Harlequin Dinner Theater in Washington, D.C. During his five years in Washington he appeared in almost two dozen shows, specializing in comic roles. In 1977 he moved to the Milwaukee Repertory Theater where he continued his work as an actor and resumed writing plays.

Starting in 1979 the Milwaukee Rep would go on to stage all the plays Larry Shue was to write. *Grandma Duck is Dead*, a one-act farce, appeared in 1979. *The Nerd*, his first full-length play, was produced in 1981, followed by *Wenceslas Square* in 1982 and *The Foreigner* in 1983. All three plays were produced later in New York, with *The Nerd* and *The Foreigner* achieving enormous box-office success on and off Broadway, in regional theaters throughout the United States, and in London's West End. At the time of Shue's death, some 68 productions of *The Foreigner* alone were either running or scheduled to open soon in American theaters.

Shue was on the verge of major international success as both writer and actor when he died. He was working on a film version of *The Foreigner* for Disney Productions, and he had been cast in a featured role in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a performance that would have marked his Broadway acting debut. He was to appear in the Hollywood film, *Sweet Liberty*, and he was negotiating with NBC for a television comedy series.

The popularity of Shue's work rests on its comic appeal to several constants in human experience: shyness, guilt, social awkwardness, the liberating power of disguise, and the pitfalls of language. Of his four plays, three—including *The Nerd*—focus on characters whose extreme diffidence or maladroitness makes it almost impossible for them to get through the most ordinary social transactions successfully, and whose lives are transformed through some version of role-playing and make-believe.

Shue's fascination with shyness, disguise, the hazards of language, and the pain of everyday social life seems to grow directly from his own experience. According to David Richards, "Shue was so unfailingly funny and inventive" as an actor that "people were often surprised to discover how quiet and introverted he could be offstage." "I'm a square," Shue said of himself, "I stammer and stutter a lot. A real klutz, especially when I go out into the world to do a big thing, like buy a hamburger."

If ordering a hamburger was an occasion of anxiety, the idea of taking on a task like directing a play absolutely overwhelmed him. "If an actor told me he didn't want to move left, I'm afraid I'd say, 'That's okay. I'll just move the set right.'"

His love of acting was based on his desire to escape this inhibited, real-life self by escaping into a new identity on stage. By taking on a theatrical role Shue could disguise his timid and ineffectual side while revealing another, equally authentic self: the performer whose power could command the attention and laughter of an audience. Life was frightening for Shue precisely because of its difference from theater: "It's because you can't rehearse it first," he declared.

His interest in disguise was likewise rooted in his own experience. Friends of Shue remember his delight in "pulling off . . . double-talk impersonations at parties," where he would pretend to be speaking an alien language to avoid the embarrassment of talking to strangers.

Real encounters with real foreigners also reinforced his sense of the waywardness of conversation—even between people ostensibly speaking the same language. In 1974, Shue visited Czechoslovakia, an experience that provided the basis for *Wenceslas Square*. In several scenes from that play, Shue explores the absurd turns that communication takes when people try to talk to each other across the barrier of linguistic difference. At one point Vince tries to teach Ladislav an English idiom:

LADISLAV. *English--my English--has grown--down.*

VINCE. *We'd say, "My English is rusty." . . . . .*

LADISLAV. *(With dictionary. . . . Reading.) Rusty--"brown from oxidation" . . . .*

*(Smiling) My English is brown from oxidation. . . . Good. Now--shall we eat the beer?*

The humor in such moments arises from the contrast between the speaker's earnest assumption that he is saying something coherent and the surreal wrongness of the words—a situation that recurs frequently in Shue's plays.

The absurdity of conversational miscues, the sufferings of the terminally diffident, the alchemical power of impersonation all combine to make *The Nerd* a clear embodiment of Shue's modest theory of dramatic composition: "I write plays out of embarrassment. . . . I generally write them either about my personal experiences, or I find an interesting character and try to fill in the world around him." Or both, as is the case in this play.

## II. THE SETTING

The play takes place in Terre Haute, Indiana in a "large, friendly room" in the apartment of Willum Cubbert, an architect. The room, on the second floor of a building owned by Willum, overlooks the neighborhood, and provides a bird's eye view of "autumn trees," and a "feeling . . . of adventurous rusticity, rather as if we were in a treetop ourselves." The playwright calls our attention to the room's furnishings, consisting of "hand-fashioned bookshelves" and a variety of art works, "all quite good." In addition to providing living space for its owner, this room also "does service as dining room, workroom, saloon and club for" the other inhabitants of the building.

Each of these details is important in establishing Willum's character. The room is "friendly" and it functions as a welcoming social center for Willum's tenants. We would therefore expect Willum himself to exhibit human warmth and consideration, as well as pleasure in the company of others. In addition, the room creates a sense of living in the "treetops," suggesting a kind of boyish playfulness in the owner, as if he were still climbing oaks and maples, and building treehouses for himself. Counterpointing this is the adult good taste evident in the furniture and pictures. So we might expect to find in Willum an appealing mixture of grown-up seriousness and child-like fun—a person sanely balanced between the demands of work and the rewards of play.

Then there is the world outside this welcoming room. The playwright chooses to plant Willum in Terre Haute, a small city of sixty-thousand in western Indiana. Why this particular town?

We may glimpse the beginnings of an answer in this exchange between a reporter from the Terre Haute *Tribune Star* and a candidate for the mayor's office:

***Tribune Star*** . One of the most consistent observations is that Terre Haute is a model of stagnation. What's your opinion of that and if you agree with that assessment, what needs to be done about it?

***Candidate***. I agree with it. We've got no growth in the city itself, other than expanding, and I think that's just to keep the population that we've got and the way we're going is picking up prisoners [at the federal prison] as far as I can see. That's the main pick up. And we're becoming a service economy.

The phrase "model of stagnation" also appears in the Wikipedia entry on Terre Haute as well as in many other sources of information about the city. The *Indianapolis Star*, for example, carried an article headlined, "Terre Haute is model of stagnation." What follows is a litany of the city's social, economic, and political shortcomings.

“Terre Haute,” the article informs us, “captures too few of the minds it educates to create many new-economy jobs. . . .” The author then quotes a local professor of business who says, “We don't do a good job of recruiting our own students to stay in the region. They want to leave the state.”

As if that weren't bad enough, we also learn that, “the city tends to undercut those who dream of improvement, like a mayor who was ousted from office after trying to jump-start the downtown.” So those who dream of a brighter future either leave town or are squelched by a hostile environment.

And it's no wonder people want to flee. According to one young student, “Terre Haute's downtown, its parks and even the Vigo County courthouse aren't appealing. ‘It's not an aesthetically pleasing town,’ [the student] said.” As a matter of fact, “Referring to the sharp, sewage-like odor that occasionally wafts across town, he added, ‘It actually smells.’”

If only ugly buildings and a sewage-like stench were the worst of it, folks might be persuaded to soldier on in Terre Haute. After all, it boasts five institutions of higher education, many sports events, a symphony, a community theater, and an art museum.

But according to recreational therapy major, Bridget Lawson, the straw that broke the camel's back of civic loyalty among her friends was laid on when, “One morning they found themselves repulsed by a green film that settled on some cars overnight. Lawson couldn't identify the material but said, ‘People don't want to live in a place like that.’”

Given such conditions, it's little wonder that the only reliable growth in Terre Haute comes from the increase of its prison population.

Whether this is an accurate portrait of Terre Haute is irrelevant. What counts for the playwright is the way outsiders—i.e., his audience—will tend to view the city. And those perceptions, clearly, are negative.

So Shue sticks tasteful, friendly, boyish, appealing Willum in a stagnant, dream-crushing, evil-smelling, slime-depositing little city whose major industry is the state prison. Not surprisingly, with a setting like this, the play is all about Willum's need to escape.

### **III. THE PLOT**

*The Nerd* begins on November 4<sup>th</sup>, the evening of Willum's 34<sup>th</sup> birthday. His friends, Axel and Tansy, spring a miniature surprise party on him as he returns home at the end of the day. Axel, the drama critic for the local paper, and Tansy, the local t.v. weather-girl, discuss Willum's situation while he is busy in the kitchen. Tansy, it seems, has been Willum's girlfriend for the past year or two, but she is now about to leave Terre Haute for a new job as weather forecaster in Washington, D.C. She thinks that Willum, an

architect, is, “wonderful; he’s talented, he’s the gentlest man I’ve ever known. . .” However, she does have one significant reservation: “He’s—he could use a little gumption, I think . . . .”

“Gumption” is a word not often heard in contemporary conversation, so Tansy’s concern requires some parsing. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary* “gumption” comprises, “Boldness of enterprise; . . . aggressiveness . . . guts . . . spunk.” Presumably Willum’s deficiency in these qualities is at least partly responsible for Tansy’s decision to leave him behind in Terre Haute as she goes off to D.C. Exactly how Willum shows this defect becomes clear as the act proceeds.

Willum returns from the kitchen to listen to his telephone messages. He has left a greeting mentioning the recently passed Hallowe’en holiday, and inviting people to drop by to celebrate his birthday. One message is from a man called Red Graham, offering him a job in Alexandria, Virginia designing a housing development. Realizing that Alexandria is across the river from D.C., Willum is tempted to accept the offer, but then declares, “Housing development, big yawn.” This is the kind of work he’s done before, architecture that’s “not art.” Meanwhile, he has a more challenging career assignment in the works: designing the Regency Hotel, a job that will keep him in Terre Haute for the next year.

There are also messages from Warnock Waldgrave, the owner of the Regency, who declares his intention of dropping by with his family, and from Axel’s “new friend,” Kemp Hall, the “Damnedst character man you ever saw”—a professional actor, judging from that description.

Most importantly there is a message from Rick Steadman—the man who saved Willum’s life in Vietnam. Astonishingly, however, Willum has never laid eyes on his benefactor. Instead he was lying wounded and unconscious on the battlefield when Steadman, himself wounded, dragged him to safety.

Understandably, Willum feels an unlimited debt of obligation to this never-seen savior. In fact he has written to Steadman, declaring that, “As long as I’m *alive*, you will have someone on this earth who will do *anything* for you. I mean it. Money? A place to stay? Anything.” Now, it seems, Rick has returned to claim his due.

But Rick, in the first of many gaffes he will commit in the play, misunderstands Willum’s answering-machine reference to Hallowe’en as an invitation to a costume party, a bit of confusion that will have dire comic consequences.

Meanwhile, Waldgrave arrives with Clelia, his anxiety-ridden wife, and his son, Thor, “a monster.” Thor immediately throws a tantrum, declares he hates being there, stomps on his father’s foot, and locks himself in the bedroom, demanding fifty dollars as the price of coming out.

This is more than his father is willing to pay, so Thor stays locked up while the adults go on with their dinner party. Clelia, Thor's fretful mom, takes Tansy aside and asks her for something she might break—a small piece of crockery, perhaps—as a way of relieving the tension of living with her overbearing husband and unruly son. Tansy takes her to the kitchen to find a cup, leaving the stage momentarily empty.

Sensing an opportunity for mischief, Thor emerges from the bedroom “*festooned with Willum's flowered boxer shorts, bathrobe, soap-on-a-rope, and so on. He brandishes a flashlight as if it were some sort of a laser weapon.*” His triumphant masquerade is short-lived, however, as the bell rings, and Thor opens the door to find Rick Steadman “*dressed in a Hallowe'en costume which is really needlessly horrible . . . the Creature from the Black Lagoon. . .*” Totally unprepared for such a hideous visitation, Thor shrieks in horror, and dives into a closet.”

Rick remains oblivious to his effect on the terrified child. Instead, misinterpreting Thor's retreat to the closet as a signal that a game of hide-and-seek is afoot, he ducks behind a chair and waits to see what develops.

At which point, Willum and Waldgrave return, talking business. Hearing their voices, Thor bolts out of the closet and seeks protection in his father's arms, fearfully disclosing to him his encounter with a monster. Immediately, Waldgrave puts the boy over his knee and spansks him lustily for telling lies. Reeling in pain and fear, Thor once again retreats to the bedroom, where he remains for most of the rest of the act.

As the adults try to restore some semblance of order to the evening, Rick Steadman, in full monster attire, rises up from his hiding place, and once again throws things into confusion.

The ensuing exchange captures the essentials of virtually all of Rick's future social encounters in the play:

RICK. Excuse me, is this twenty-two fifty-five River Road? . . .

WILLUM. Uh—what? What?

RICK. (*Who never says his final g's.*) What's goeen' on?

WILLUM. What?

RICK. Why was I hideen'?

WILLUM. I—I—what do you mean?

WALDGRAVE. What's going on?

RICK. That's what I want to know. . . . Who are you?

WILLUM. (*Realizing who he is.*) Rick Steadman!

RICK. You're Rick Steadman?

WILLUM. No, no! *You—you are!*

RICK. That's what I *thought*. (*He gives an ironic snort.*) I was gonna say. . . . 'Cause I didn't think there would be more than one Rick Steadman, especially out here in the woods.

As he stands in his monster suit facing a room full of normally-dressed people, Rick remains sublimely oblivious to his effect on others. His presence is absurd and disturbing, but he is the only one who doesn't realize that fact. Moreover, he is completely impervious to social or verbal cues of any kind. He can't hear the difference between Willum's saying "Rick Steadman" as an expression of recognition and his saying it as a self-introduction. What follows is nonsensical cross-talk, with Rick's miscue setting off a chain of non-sequiturs. Rick's verbal performance is like Abbot and Costello's "Who's-on-first" routine: an exercise in naïve literalism that creates total misunderstanding.

This first social exchange sets the tone of many others to come: Rick, sublimely unaware of his own maladroitness, will prove to be a well of social discomfort for others.

From this point on, Rick unselfconsciously commits one gaffe after another. For example, presuming that the others at the party are also in costume, he asks Clelia, "So, what are you?" Taking this to be a question about her actual occupation—another verbal miscue—she answers, "I—I'm a teacher." Rick, imagining she is describing, not her job but her Hallowe'en costume, responds, "A teacher, right! With your hair all pulled back and all, and stoopeen' all down, that's great." And so, breaking the taboo against telling people how they really look—without realizing he is doing so—he creates another painfully embarrassing moment through his social ineptitude.

As the act proceeds, the gaffes grow more egregious and the other guests grow more flustered, while Rick remains unflappable. And all the while, we can see Willum's growing distress as he realizes that the man who saved his life is an irredeemable misfit—a hopeless nerd. Perhaps even "The Nerd," in capital letters—the very exemplar of the species.

The evening's worsening series of nerd-created embarrassments culminates with a party game suggested by Rick: "Shoes and Socks." The players remove their shoes and socks, place them in a large sack, put grocery bags over their heads, poke out eye-holes, and hum while Rick hides the footgear on the sill of an open window. Rick then explains that he will begin reading aloud from a randomly chosen place in the Bible until he comes to any mention of shoes or feet, at which point one of the head-bagged players is to call out, "shoes and socks." We never find out what would happen next, because Willum informs Rick that there is no Bible in his apartment. A disappointed Rick calls the game off, and while reaching for the bag of hidden shoes and socks, knocks it out the window. We hear the sound of a distant splash as the bag falls into muddy puddle below.

While the barefoot players are out retrieving their footwear, a frustrated Willum grabs the terrifying monster head from Rick's discarded costume and tosses it into the bedroom, where the horrid apparition re-terrifies the still-hiding and still-cowering Thor. Screeching in fright, the fear-maddened child runs into the living room and seeks safety in the closet, only to encounter the headless body of the monster-suit hanging on its door. Now totally traumatized, the boy faints dead-away on Willum's floor. Unable to rouse the child, a confused Willum stuffs Thor into the closet and closes the door.

At this point Waldgrave and the others return, wet and muddied, clutching their ruined footwear. Waldgrave, whose pricey shoes are ruined and whose eye is swelling from a poke he received from Rick, now discovers that Willum has stuffed his unconscious son into a closet. Enraged, he and his family storm out of the apartment, leaving Willum to wonder if his future as Waldgrave's architect has just gone down the drain.

But The Nerd is still not finished disrupting Willum's life. Having been offered a place to stay at Willum's, he accepts it, and as his host's chaotic birthday comes to an end, Rick is settling in for what may be the first of many nights on the couch. But he still has a mile or so to go before he sleeps. He must perform his pre-slumber ritual: singing patriotic songs while accompanying himself on the tambourine. As the first act ends, Willum watches and listens in misery as The Nerd jingle-jangles his way through *The Star Spangled Banner*.

As Act II begins, we learn that Rick has now spent six days as Willum's "guest," driving his host ever deeper into distraction and despair:

It's a hundred things a day . . . Little things mostly, but they're starting to take their toll. I'm becoming irrational, snappish. . . . After the shoes-and-socks party, it took me two days to square things with Waldgrave; and by then I was . . . an exhausted, cowering wreck at work.

As a result of this emotional drainage, Willum has been unable to resist Waldgrave's insistent pressure to wring every touch of artistry out of his design for the Regency hotel. This pressure to betray his artistic vision has been a constant theme in his relations with Waldgrave. The business man wants to eliminate every vestige of "old fashioned"—and expensive—decoration suggested by Willum, and to pare the designs down to the bare essentials of walls and roof. As a result of his constant capitulations to Waldgrave, Willum has produced a design for something that, "Looks like a huge air conditioner."

Willum's willingness to do Waldgrave's philistine bidding is one glaring instance of what Tansy has called his lack of "gumption." Another is Willum's inability to expel Rick Steadman from his life.

Seeing Willum's inability to attack the problem directly, Axel and Tansy suggest that they try to drive Rick away by concocting a series of odd rituals and repellent meals which they would convince him were established features of life in Terre Haute. Says Axel,

[W]hy couldn't we hit Rick with a dose of culture shock? . . . I bet if we could find things to do that are stupid enough, or strange, or boring enough—I betcha money Rick'll be on the next Amtrak back [home].

But Willum can't bring himself to play this kind of trick on the man who saved his life, so he vetoes the idea, resolving instead to deal directly with his problem by having a serious talk with Rick. Doubting the success of this approach, Axel and Tansy leave.

In short order, Rick arrives. But before Willum can persuade his unwanted guest to depart, The Nerd strikes again. As Willum searches for his just-completed final color drawings of the Regency—the product of hours of painstaking work—Rick informs his host that he had come across those renderings earlier and decided that something was missing from the design: a chimney. He slides the architect's handiwork out from under the couch, where he has hidden it, and triumphantly displays his improvements:

*Imposed on the roof of a careful watercolor of the Regency is an immense, hideous, black square, boldly executed in some less refined medium—Crayola, perhaps, or laundry marker. A second square, on the opposite side of the roof, has been begun, then cancelled with a large 'X.'*

As if the black squares weren't violation enough, Rick has added insult to injury by putting a hole at the top of the "chimney," through which, in a demonstration of his creative flair, he proceeds to blow cigarette smoke. Deliriously pleased with his efforts, he declares, "Y'know, I thought I was a lot of things, but I sure never knew I was an architect!" And now that he has discovered this new talent, he is eager to put it into practice by becoming Willum's business partner.

This is the last straw for Willum. He rushes to the phone and begs Axel to begin immediately to execute the plan for driving Rick away through culture-shock, thus ending the first scene of the act.

As the second scene begins, Axel, Tansy, and Willum are having a telephone conference with Axel's actor-friend, Kemp. It seems Kemp has been helping them to devise the outlandish pseudo-customs and rituals that will drive The Nerd out of Terre Haute.

When Rick arrives, they kick things off by offering him tea, with lemon or sand as options. Unfazed, Rick chooses lemon. In fact, Rick remains unfazed throughout the whole evening's array of bizarre customs, repellent foods, and boring parlor games—one of which involves watching an apple core turn brown. To everyone's despair, he declares that this is "the most fun night I had since I got here!"

Desperate to prevent their plan from backfiring, they invent a story about marauding wild pigs that periodically invade Terre Haute, mauling and killing its innocent citizens. In fact, they say—improvising ever-escalating absurdities—Willum was once bitten by one of these creatures, and as a result has become a sort of were-pig who snorts at the full moon. Unfortunately for their plan, Rick declares that wouldn't think of leaving town if it would mean missing the sight of his friend turning into a pig.

At this point, desperation drives Axel to initiate a fake pig exorcism ritual which requires that they all wear napkin rings on their ears, wave dust mops in the air, and throw cottage

cheese out the window while rhythmically chanting spells against the pig-god. Just as they are at the height of their improvised frenzy, Waldgrave arrives, covered with cottage cheese.

Rick, it seems, has taken it on himself to invite Willum's boss to this dinner party—an act that, for Waldgrave, drives the final nail into the coffin of his relationship with the architect. Disgusted at the sight of Willum and his friends dancing around the apartment like lunatics, enraged at having cottage cheese dumped on him, still resentful about his son's traumatic experiences at Willum's last party, and, above all, indignant at the delays in getting his hotel built, Waldgrave fires his architect, and storms out of the house in high dudgeon.

This, the stage directions tell us, pushes Willum "*smoothly over the brink.*" At last, he musters the resolve—the gumption—to rid himself of The Nerd:

Maybe this is wrong of me, but at this point I'm ready to take the consequences—a lifetime of guilt, an eternity in hell, either one sounds just fine. I don't owe you my life. Okay? That was my mistake; I let things go this far because I thought I owed you my life. But I don't. Nobody owes anybody his life. . . . You're leaving now, Rick. . . . Go.

Finally, confronted directly with rejection, Rick catches on. Only a sledgehammer can crack The Nerd's cast-iron coat of social insensitivity. Moreover, Tansy is impressed by the move: "Willum," she says admiringly, "you don't know how long I've waited to see you do something like that."

With Rick gone at last, Willum experiences a revelation: he really does owe The Nerd a debt of gratitude. Thanks to Rick, he is liberated from the lousy job of working for Waldgrave. And he realizes that he can find better things to do—perhaps working for Red Graham in Alexandria. Once there,

sooner or later I get myself another hotel, or I get something better than that. . . .  
And between jobs . . . I'm gonna drive across that river to Washington, D.C.—and I'm gonna court Tansy till she cracks.

A new and better life beckons to Willum, all, ironically, thanks to The Nerd. In honor of his rebirth, he and Tansy head out for celebratory dinner.

Axel stays behind, waiting for his actor-friend Kemp, who is to go with him to the opening of the Terre Haute Arts Pavilion. Kemp arrives, and we are confronted with a final revelation: standing before us is "Rick Steadman." The Nerd was nothing other than the creation of Axel's friend, a fabrication designed precisely to accomplish the outcome we have just witnessed: to jar Willum out of his Terre Haute rut and onto a road leading to wider vistas. One more surprise awaits us before the curtain falls: not only was Rick a creation of Kemp's—but so also was Red Graham. Willum really is taking a leap into the unknown.

#### IV CHARACTERS.

**WILLUM.** One way characters in plays exhibit attractiveness is by having likeable friends and hateful enemies. Willum is fortunate in both. Axel, Tansy, Kemp, and even put-upon Clelia all seem to agree that Willum is “wonderful.” Only the boorish Waldgrave and his monstrous son don’t share this assessment, and that in itself boosts our sense of Willum’s appeal.

It’s easy to see why people like him: his house is open to all comers; he leaves invitations to dinner on his answering machine; he won’t pressure his girlfriend to stay in Terre Haute; he changes his designs to suit Waldgrave; and he puts up with The Nerd long after any reasonable person’s tolerance would have expired.

These are all the acts of a “nice” man—but each one carries in it a germ of self-destruction. Take the answering-machine greeting. As Axel cynically points out, such a message is “an open invitation to thieves.” Letting Tansy off the hook is a kind of romantic fecklessness. And putting up with The Nerd for so long leads Willum dangerously close to emotional collapse. Thus, Willum is a man whose central virtue—his niceness—is also his greatest handicap. As Tansy notes at the beginning of the play, he lacks “gumption,” which turns out to mean that he lacks the force and determination to stand up for himself, to say no when necessary, to draw a line around his own fundamental needs and to forbid anyone to cross it.

Apart from being nice, Willum’s identity is built around being an architect-who-is-also-an-artist. It is because he cherishes that vision of himself that he rejects the Alexandria housing-development commission: it isn’t art. But his niceness—his willingness to accommodate others—is eating away at the foundation of this identity. Step-by-step he allows Waldgrave to erase any traces of his artistic vision from the Regency hotel design until it winds up looking like a “huge air conditioner.” The best Willum can say about the final product is that, “It still has my name on it. And that’s—something, I guess.” But what Willum unconsciously defines here is the fate of the terminally nice man: he winds up as nothing but a name attached to a featureless box.

Even Rick Steadman winds up posing a threat to Willum’s artistic identity. As the play develops, Rick becomes an ever increasing burden to Willum, a kind of clumsy succubus or parasite who drains away his host’s happiness. By the play’s end, Rick has defaced Willum’s drawing, attached himself to the architect as a professional partner, and brought about the loss of Willum’s hotel commission. And Willum has sat passively by, too nice to stop The Nerd from destroying his life.

The central action of the play is Willum’s passage from mere niceness, through comic suffering, to gumption.

**AXEL.** At one point in the play, Tansy calls Axel a “curmudgeon,” which the dictionary defines as, “An ill-tempered person full of resentment and stubborn notions.” This is far from the case. Instead Axel is one of a long line of dramatic characters who are witty and

cynical on the outside, but loyal and even sentimental down deep. Think of Romeo's friend, Mercutio; or Captain Renault / Claude Raines in *Casablanca*; or David Spade in *Just Shoot Me*. These characters act as foils, providing the contrast that sets off the qualities of the main characters in sharper focus.

Thus, in contrast to Willum's niceness we have Axel's constant sarcastic needling. "Does Washington really need one more weather girl?," he asks Tansy, mocking her plans for the future. When Thor locks himself in the bedroom, Willum asks, "Is there anything I can do?" And Axel responds sadistically, "You get the mortar, I'll get the bricks," reminding us of Poe's grisly tale of death by immurement, "The Cask of Amontillado." Later in the play, he deflatingly describes the Terre Haute Arts Pavilion as "quite beautiful. . . . It's built entirely out of creosote."

It's as if Axel feels the need to undercut Willum's agreeable politeness with the sting of mockery, adding his own large splash of vinegar to the social salad.

In the end, however, it turns out that Axel is the play's hidden nice guy, the man who performs what Tansy calls an "anonymous favor"—a helpful act for which he will receive no credit. It is he who sets up the ruse of The Nerd, thereby liberating Willum from the chains of his own inhibitions. But this act is not purely selfless. Characteristically, Axel, the acerbic aesthete, operates through the amusing sting of a practical joke rather than through anything so emollient as sentimental hand-holding.

**TANSY** is in many respects the female version of Willum: cheerful and accommodating. But only up to a point. For example, when Rick announces that he has already eaten the main item on the birthday dinner menu—Cornish game hen—for lunch, Tansy is moderately happy to dash into the kitchen to fix him an alternate dish, spaghetti. After a frenzied quarter-hour of cooking, she presents the pasta to The Nerd:

RICK. (*Cute-regretfully.*) Guess what?

TANSY. (*Not letting herself guess.*) What?

RICK. I'm full.

TANSY. (*Staying in control.*) Oh. . . ? Uh, well—you—you're full?

RICK. Yep.

TANSY. Uh—

RICK. (*Giving her his plate of spaghetti.*) So, what do you want to do with this?

AXEL. (*To Tansy.*) Oh, go ahead!

WILLUM. Tansy! . . . He saved my life. . . . I can explain about the food.

TANSY. It doesn't matter. (*She takes the spaghetti into the kitchen.*)

We notice that Axel wickedly encourages what Tansy must be silently longing to do: dump the spaghetti on Rick's infuriating head. But she stays "in control." Unlike Willum, who is still miles away from the resentful head of steam which leads him to kick The Nerd out at the end of the play, Tansy immediately realizes that their guest is a self-centered jerk, and is on the brink of acting accordingly. Her self-restraint at this moment is simple good manners.

This is consistent with what we learn about Tansy at the beginning of the play: she has decided to get out of Terre Haute, to go to Washington and pursue a new life. From the outset, she already has a share of the “gumption” she wishes Willum would acquire. And not even her affection for the architect will prevent her from striking out on her own. She does say later in the play that Willum’s troubles with Rick make her feel like a “traitor” for leaving town, but she never quite gets to the point where she offers to cancel her plans and stand by her man.

**THE WALDGRAVES.** Warnock, his wilting wife, and his monstrous son hang together as a unit. Each creates and sustains the other. Warnock, the father, is a variation of a familiar type: the crude, blustering, overbearing philistine. His browbeaten wife, Clelia, shows the effects of years of living with such a man, while her consequent submissiveness helps to reinforce his tyrannical personality. Meanwhile, it’s clear that their obnoxious son, Thor, has found a “role model” in his father, who in turn beats the child for behaving like his progenitor. Collectively, they bring immediate chaos to Willum’s cheerful apartment, Thor throwing a tantrum, Warnock screaming at the recalcitrant boy, and Clelia breaking crockery to calm her nerves.

Later, while playing “shoes and socks,” Warnock becomes enraged at the absurdity and discomfort of Rick’s silly parlor game, going so far as to take a swing at The Nerd.

Warnock also brings disruption to Willum’s professional life. A conventionally malign capitalist, he has no interest in beauty or art, caring instead only about money. Consequently, he has no patience for the aesthetic elements Willum has incorporated into his design for the Regency Hotel: “That archway there, all that junk around the windows. Get rid of that, we’re in business. What’s your problem?”

The problem, as it turns out, is that with “all that junk removed” the building will look like a “huge air conditioner.” It will be featureless and ugly. This seems to be Waldgrave’s primary purpose as a character: to create ugliness. This is what he does with Willum’s building, and it is what he does socially at Willum’s birthday party.

**RICK STEADMAN / THE NERD.** Rick, of course, doesn’t “really” exist. He is to the characters in the play as those characters are to us: the creation of a dramatist and an actor. Rick’s is a one man play-within-a-play. And like the “Mousetrap” in *Hamlet*, the purpose of Rick’s performance is to have a moral impact on a member of the audience. Hamlet wanted to shake Claudius into some sort of admission of guilt; Rick wants to goad Willum into an act of gumption.

The dramatist / actor who invents Rick, Kemp Hall, does his work well. In Rick, he creates a human being so thoroughly obnoxious that even the most saintly nice guy would be pushed to wrath and rejection.

Ordinarily we don't think of nerds as particularly infuriating types. Dull, certainly, and socially inept—but not people who threaten our happiness. But that is what Rick does to Willum. What is it that makes him such a baleful creature?

Character, as Aristotle tells us, “is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids.” Rick always chooses to do what benefits or interests Rick, regardless of the inconvenience, discomfort, or pain it inflicts on others. He never performs a selfless, or even disinterested action, in the entire play. Whether he's forcing his parlor games on Willum and his unhappy guests, or practicing his tambourine at bedtime, or defacing Willum's architectural drawings, Rick behaves in a way that is entirely oblivious to the needs or feelings of others. In effect, he is a kind of sociopath—a person for whom other human beings have no moral reality. The monster suit that he wears on his first entrance really does tell us who Rick is.

To be sure, Rick is no serial killer or systematic sadist. He is a sociopath whose acts of aggression are little, ludicrous things. Playing “shoes and socks” won't kill you. It will just ruin your evening. Listening to the tambourine as you're trying to fall asleep isn't fatal. It just keeps you awake all night. Seeing your drawing defaced isn't a mortal blow, it just takes every breath of wind out of your sails. But an endless succession of these moments of ludicrous torture might just do you in.

Of course, it's highly unlikely that the real Rick Steadman, the man who refused treatment for his own wounds until Willum's safety was assured, would be such a creature. In fact, we can assume that he would be pretty much the opposite of Kemp Hall's creation. But the real Rick Steadman, the self-sacrificing altruist, would simply never have provoked Willum to act. Instead, we would have had two nice guys getting along famously—absolutely the opposite of a compelling dramatic situation.

**V THEMES.** Like *The Foreigner*, this play explores the power of disguise, in this case the life-transforming power of performance. Without Kemp Hall's performance of Rick Steadman, Willum would have soldiered on in Terre Haute, abandoned by Tansy and bullied by Waldgrave. But The Nerd—that absolute zero of human empathy—finally arouses a spark of resistance in Willum. He can stand up for himself and strike back at Rick Steadman because The Nerd really has no feelings to hurt. He is impervious to input from other people. And so Willum need feel no remorse in throwing the man who saved his life out of his house. This act of self-defense awakens Willum to the possibility of fending for himself in other ways, and thus Kemp's performance draws out of Willum a whole train of consequences that will change his life. It is an example of art at its most powerful.

Modern drama is filled with moments of self-affirmation like Willum's. In fact it is a critical commonplace that the modern movement in theater began with just such a moment: Nora's rejection of home and family at the end of Ibsen's *A Doll House*. Ibsen, and after him Shaw, would explore repeatedly the theme of self-discovery and the concomitant repudiation of convention and its irksome restraints. Women rebelling

against sexual prejudice; people of color asserting themselves against racism; gays emerging from the closet: these have been the themes of countless plays, movies, t.v. shows, novels, and short stories. Willum's revolt against Midwestern niceness and his assertion of the right to live his own life on his own terms is yet another in this now venerable line of narratives.

## **VI QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How would you define the term, "nerd?"
2. Why does the author have Rick enter wearing a monster costume?
3. Do you think Willum should change his hotel design to please Waldgrave? Why so? Why not?
4. What do you owe to a person who saved your life?
5. Why do you think Thor behaves so badly?
6. Considering all the misery Willum suffered because of The Nerd, do you think it was right for Axel to play such a painful practical joke on his friend?
7. Do you know people who play roles in social situations? Who try to be different from the way they really are? If so, why do they do that?
8. How do you think Willum would feel if he discovered the truth about "Rick Steadman?" Angry? Amused? Grateful? Why?
9. Axel does all he can to get Willum to move out of Terre Haute. Why doesn't Axel want to leave?
10. Which is more important: being considerate of other people's feelings or getting what you want? Why?