

NYS Theatre Institute Study Guide

**Pulitzer Prize-Winning
Comedy-Drama**

Idiot's Delight

Book by
Robert E. Sherwood

Original Music by
Will Severin

education services

INSERVICE / TEACHER PREVIEW

Come to the Inservice for *Idiot's Delight* at the Schacht Fine Arts Center, Russell Sage College, Troy, New York on **Tuesday, October 3, 2006 4-6PM.**

Meet the creative team. Look behind the scenes...walk the set. Observe a segment of rehearsal. Gather ideas and exercises for your classroom. It's **free** - just call **(518) 274-3286** or **e-mail cbs@nysti.org** before **Wednesday, September 27, 2006 to RSVP.**

Teachers bringing classes to a performance are invited to return at 7:30 PM to watch a dress rehearsal.

PRE-SHOW INTRO / CLASSROOM PREPARATION

Right in your classroom! Engage your students in the play before attending the performance. Presented by an Institute educator, the program traces the creation of the production, introduces characters, and explores the responsibilities of audience members through an interactive Power Point presentation. Easy to arrange: call **(518) 274-3286** or **e-mail cbs@nysti.org**. There is a nominal travel fee for this program.

programs

OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Residency Programs:

Classes at NYSTI following a 10:00AM performance.

Internships and Educators-in-Residence

Theatre Arts School

SummerStage and Summer Theatre Institute

For additional information regarding availability and cost visit the Educators' Greenroom at:

www.nysti.org/greenroom.shtm

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Patricia Di Benedetto Snyder, Producing Artistic Director

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Cover: Title Treatment by Linda O'Malley

Dear Colleague,

At NYSTI, we appreciate your efforts to provide students with interdisciplinary learning experiences. To assist you in planning activities to accompany your theatre experience, we have suggested how the activities and discussion topics created for Idiot's Delight connect with the NYS Education Department Learning Standards for The Arts.

Standard #1: Students will actively engage in the processes that constitute creation and performance in the arts (dance, music, theatre and visual arts) and participate in various roles in the arts.

- Use an improvisation to explore the concept of neutrality.*
- Write a monologue for a character who lies about his background.*

Standard #2: Students will be knowledgeable about and make use of the materials and resources available for participation in the arts in various roles.

- Attend residency classes with NYSTI's teacher/technicians and teacher/actors.*
- Arrange a Pre-Show Intro/Classroom Preparation on the creation of the production.*

Standard #3: Students will respond critically to a variety of works in the arts, connecting the individual work to other works and to other aspects of human endeavor and thought.

- Use the At the Performance section of the guide to discuss individual interpretations and evaluation of the creative team's work.*
- Write a review of the NYSTI production of Idiot's Delight.*

Standard #4: Students will develop an understanding of the personal and cultural forces that shape artistic communication and how the arts in turn shape the diverse cultures of past and present society.

- Read other plays by Robert E. Sherwood.*
- Read plays written by Clifford Odets, Thornton Wilder, or other playwrights of the 1930s.*

...before the performance

OVERVIEW

Captain. *I give you my word that train will not move tonight, and maybe not tomorrow night, and maybe never.*

What if a group of tourists from various countries were stranded in a small hotel in the Italian Alps? What if they shared the desire to get to another destination? What if they were eager to leave a country where a war seemed imminent? This is the situation that playwright Robert E. Sherwood examines in his fantasy, *Idiot's Delight*.

The Hotel Gabrielle, located in the Italian Alps is staffed by:

Pittaluga - the Italian owner / manager

Donald Navadel - the American Recreation Director

“I ‘m here to be of service, in any way I can.”

Dumpsty - the Italian / Austrian Bellhop

“Ja, in one day I became a foreigner.”

Auguste - the Italian barman

Anna - the Italian maid

The Guests staying at the hotel include:

Dr. Waldersee - a German Research Scientist

“I am a scientist. I am a servant of the whole damn stupid human race.”

Mr. Cherry - a British painter

“I’m not going to waste any time painting.”

Mrs. Cherry - a Swedish salesgirl

“I’m glad we’re such superior people, darling.

It's so comforting."

Mr. & Mrs. Rossi - Italian tourists

Quillery - a French machinist and Radical Socialist

"I have no nationality."

Harry Van - an American Show Promoter and Performer

"All my life I've been selling phony goods to people of meagre intelligence and great faith.

Les Blondes - American showgirls - Shirley Laughlin, Beulah Tremoyne, Bebe Gould, Francine Merle, Elaine Messiger

Irene - a Russian woman

"I think the whole world should be covered with snow. It would be much more clean wouldn't it?"

Achille Weber - a very successful French munitions dealer

"I am but a humble instrument of His divine will."

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

At its best, directing is a deeply personal artistic expression. We seek out scripts that speak to our hearts, scripts that talk about issues that smolder in our minds. For me, *Idiot's Delight* is one such play. It talks about war.

Many years ago, I wrote a despairing letter to the guy who was my closest buddy when we had served together in combat in Vietnam. I wrote pages of anguished and unanswerable questions to him: why had we survived when so many good men died? What had been the purpose of it all? Who had we become? And of course, why are we here?

His reply was perfect. Instead of writing a consoling letter, he sent me a ludicrous ashtray made of seashells and looking for all the world like Groucho Marx -- complete with big cigar and oversize google-eyes. It was utterly absurd.

Idiot's Delight is the same. Through comedy, through fantasy, through drama, and through an outrageous collection of juxtapositions, it talks about war: the reasons for war, the effects of war on people, and ultimately, the

utterly ludicrous absurdity of war.

In *Idiot's Delight*, third-rate song-and-dance, inopportune romance, an impossible assemblage of characters, comical conflicts, fanciful imagination, intense self-interest and greed, ridiculous coincidences and situations - all dance together while the world erupts around them.

Although war has been an inextricable part of all humanity since mankind first stood upright, and although all races and all nations have participated, and although war will never cease - those facts don't make war any less absurd and idiotic.

And I still have the ridiculous Groucho Marx seashell ashtray that answered my unanswerable questions as well as anything could.

-- Ed. Lange

COMMENTS ABOUT IDIOT'S DELIGHT

Harold Clurman, in his introduction to *Famous American Plays of the 1930s*, writes:

It [*Idiot's Delight*] echoes the American fear of and profound estrangement from the facts of European intrigue which led to war. One merit of Sherwood's play is that it gives us an inkling of the moral climate in our country shortly after the Italian-Ethiopian conflagration and at the outset of the Spanish civil conflict - two omens of the future scarcely understood by an average citizen. . . . The play also marks the transition from skepticism and pessimism in regard to modern life, suggested by several of Sherwood's earlier plays, to the willingness to be engaged in political struggle and an acceptance of war, exemplified by his *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*.

VOCABULARY

Knowing the meaning of the following underlined words will increase the student's appreciation and comprehension.

Pittaluga. *Why do you take it to yourself to countermand my orders?*

Don. *Because their performance was just a little too macabre to be bearable.*

Don. *I'm fed to the teeth with this little pension that you euphemistically call a high-grade resort hotel.*

Don. *Forgive me, Captain - but two guests are actually arriving. I must go out and be affable.*

Captain. *But, the taste for obscenity is incurable, isn't it?*

Harry. *She's the product of the esthetic school, and therefore more of a dreamer.*

Harry. *Bebe is our shimmy artiste, but incorrigibly unsophisticated.*

Don. *Italy may be difficult to understand, Mr. Van, but we happen to be on the brink of a frightful calamity.*

Mr. Cherry. *It's the Fascist idea of being desperately modern - Dynamic Symmetry!*

Harry. *To say we were a sensation in Monte Carlo would be to state a simple incontrovertible fact.*

Quillery. *Expose them! That's all we have to do. Expose them - for what they are - atavistic children.*

Quillery. *I'm afraid you think it is all futile idealism!*



Preliminary costume sketch for Irene designed by Brent Griffin for NYSTI's production of *Idiot's Delight*.

Weber. *There is only one way to account for it, my dear . . .*

Spontaneous combustion of the dictatorial age.

Irene. *And then every body knows me for what I am - a London guttersnipe - with a **piquant** dash of Armenian.*

Dumpstsy. *That American **impresario**, that Mr. Harry Van - he will give us entertainment with his dancing girls.*

Doctor. *"Backsliding" - he said - "spiritual backsliding to that dark and tortured age - that , believe me, is disease! A **degradation** of mankind - a degradation painful and offensive to conceive."*

Harry. *Your strict attention is not **obligatory**.*

Captain. *Mr. Quillery was very **injudicious**.*

TIME LINE

It is critical to remember that Robert E. Sherwood wrote this play in the mid-30s. He did not know the future. We must cast away our hindsight and simply consider what had occurred in the years leading up to the opening of *Idiot's Delight* at the National Theatre in Washington, D.C. on March 9, 1936.

1914 - 1918 - World War I.

1919- League of Nations founded.

1929 -The Stock Market Crashes and the Great Depression begins.

1933 - Adolf Hitler becomes German Chancellor. Nazi Party establishes a totalitarian state.

The first German concentration camps are erected.

1934 - January - German police raid homes of dissident clergy in Berlin.

Fritz Haber, German Chemist, who launched the Age of Chemical Warfare dies.

February - Fascists and anti-republicans riot in France.

July- Nazis kill Austrian Premier Dollfus.



Preliminary costume sketch for Harry Van designed by Brent Griffin for NYSTI's production of *Idiot's Delight*.

President Hindenburg of Germany is succeeded by Adolf Hitler.

September - League of Nations admits Soviet Union.

October - King Alexander of Yugoslavia and French Foreign Minister Barthou are assassinated in France.

Leopold III rules Belgium but is a prisoner of war under the Nazi occupation.

1935 - January - Amelia Earhart becomes first woman to fly solo across the Pacific Ocean.

The League of Nations favors depriving Japan of mandates.

February - Rome sends troops to Italian Somalia.

Hitler violates the Treaty of Versailles by re-arming Germany.

France, Italy and Britain present a unified front responding to Germany.

Britain and Russia sign treaties to limit the power of the Reich.

August - Mass demonstrations by Nazis against German Jews.

September - Nuremberg Laws deprive Jews of their citizenship. The swastika becomes the official symbol of Nazi Germany.

October - Italy invades Ethiopia.

Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* opens in NYC.

Almost a half-million demonstrate against Fascism in Spain.

November - German Reich declares all men 18-45 are army reservists.

PLACES

After locating these countries and cities on a map, indicate which of the countries remained neutral during World War II. Which countries were considered to be Allies? Which countries were Axis Powers?

Countries - Armenia - Australia - Austria - Bavaria - Balkans - Indo-China - Italy - Persia - Switzerland

Cities - Belgrade - Berlin - Biarritz - Bucharest - Budapest - Fiume - Florence - Geneva - Kitzbuhel - London - Monte Carlo - Moscow - Paris - Prague - Rome - Schleins - Sofia - St. Moritz - Tokyo - Vienna - Zagreb - Zurich

CULTURAL REFERENCES

Don Navadel. *We have a **thé dansant** here every afternoon at 4:30 and supper dancing in the evening.*

Don Navadel. *This was formerly Austrian territory transferred by the **Treaty of Versailles**.*

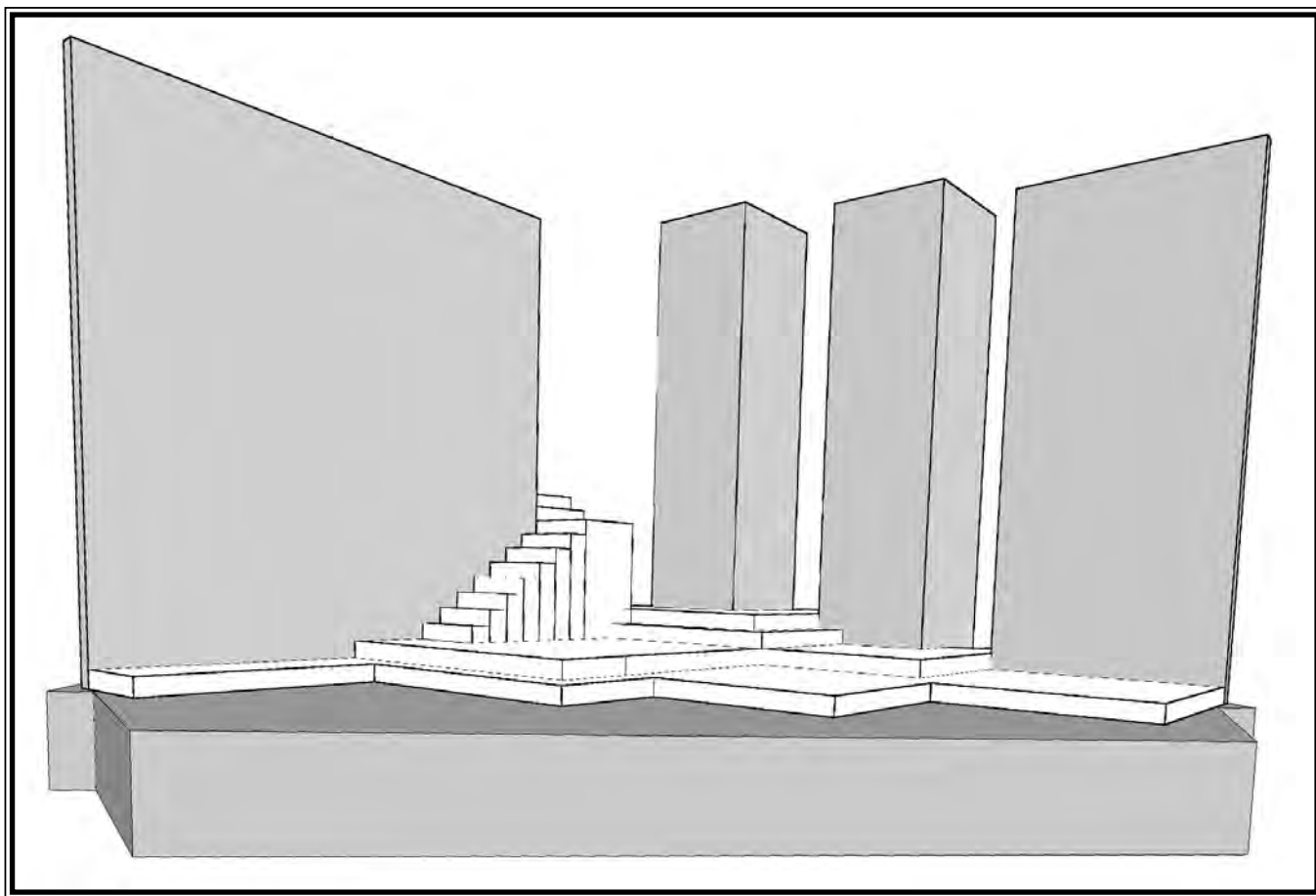
Harry. *Undoubtedly the **League of Nations** feel that they need us.*

Quillery. *This is not 1914, remember! Since then, some new voices have been heard in the world - loud voices - I need only to mention one of them - **Lenin! Nicolai Lenin.***

Doctor. *You are familiar with the writings of **Thomas Mann.***

Doctor. *Unfortunately, just now the situation in Germany is not good for research. They are infected with the same virus as here. **Chauvinistic nationalism.***

Harry. *They slapped me into a uniform and for three months before the **Armistice**, I was parading up and down guarding the **Ashokan Reservoir.***



Set elevation designed by Victor Becker for NYSTI's production of *Idiot's Delight*.

Quillery. Because he is a master of the one real League of Nations - The League of Schneider-Creusot, of Krupp, Skoda, Vickers and Dupont. The League of Death!

Harry. All we ask of you, kind friends, is “The Christian pearl of Charity.” to quote our great American poet, John Greenleaf Whittier.

TEACHER PREVIEW

NYSTI invites you to the Inservice/Teacher Preview for *Idiot’s Delight* at the Schacht Fine Arts Center, Russell Sage College, Troy, New York on **Tuesday, October 3, 2006 4-6PM**. This program provides teachers with an opportunity to meet the creative team, look behind the scenes, walk the set, and observe a segment of rehearsal. It’s **free** - just call **(518) 274-3286** or **e-mail cbs@nysti.org** before **Wednesday, September 27, 2006 to RSVP**. Teachers bringing classes to a performance are invited to return at 7:30 PM to watch a dress rehearsal.

...at the
performance

THINGS TO OBSERVE AND LISTEN FOR

Setting

Don. Your rooms are up there, opening off that gallery. All this part of the hotel is quite new. ...From here we can look into four countries.

Victor Becker, set designer, has created a set for *Idiot’s Delight* which will support the “Twilight Zone”

flavor of the piece. How does the texture of the set influence your perception of the piece? How has the designer used shape, texture, and color to accentuate the style of the production?

Costumes

Stage Directions - (The Rossis enter from left in evening clothes.)

Brent Griffin, costume designer, can suggest the timeframe through the silhouette of the characters' apparel. Notice how the clothing will suggest nationality of the character. What aspects of the clothing help support the fantasy concept of the production?

Lighting

Harry. *Are the lights OK?*

Don. *Yes, everything is ready.*

Harry. *Give me a spot and a little introduction.*

Lighting designer Betsy Adams has the challenge of creating a lighting design which will suggest the fantasy of the piece while also intimating time, mood, and focus. Watch to see how the lights will help to focus the attention of the audience on specific areas of the set. How do the lighting effects maximize the events of the final scene?

Music

Harry. *My next number will be a little song entitled "Where have you been all my life - and why didn't you stay there?"*

Will Severin has been commissioned to compose original music to underscore the production. In addition, there are specific tunes cited in the dialogue. Listen to how the melodies define the characters and the situation.

Sound Design

Pittaluga: *It is the warning for the air raids.*

Sound designer 100% Sound will be responsible

for sound effects which will heighten the drama on the stage. Listen to hear how the voices and the sound effects are amplified during the performance. Do they sound as if they are coming from a specific location?

THE SCRIPT - THE DESIGN TOOL

Members of the creative team begin their research by reading the script. As they read, they look for indications about the needs of the technical area for which they are responsible. The following is an excerpt from *Idiot's Delight* by Robert Sherwood. Read and note indications for the set designer, the costume designer, the lighting designer, the properties master, and the sound designer.

FIRST OFFICER. *Ma sono tutte ragazze belle!*

THIRD OFFICER. *Sono belle, ma proprio da far strabiliare.*

FOURTH OFFICER. *E forse ora non ci rincrescerà che hanno cancellato tutta licenza.* (They cross and exit into bar.)

HARRY. (Enters through arch C. He is chewing gum. To Doctor.) Good afternoon.

DOCTOR. Good afternoon.

HARRY. Have a drink?

DOCTOR. I am about to have one.

HARRY. Mind if I join you? (Sits next to Doctor, takes out a small, silver snuff box, toys with it.)

DOCTOR. This is a public room. (Dumpty enters from bar and serves Doctor with glass of mineral water.)

HARRY. It's a funny situation, isn't it?

DOCTOR. (Rises) To what situation do you refer?

HARRY. All this stopping of trains . . . and orders from Rome and we on the threshold of a calamity.

DOCTOR. To me it is not funny. (Pays Dumpty with coins. Takes glass and starts for steps at R. Dumpty crosses L. a few steps.)

HARRY. Scotch.

DUMPTY. With soda, sir?

HARRY. Yes.

DUMPTY. Yes, sir.

QUILLERY. I will have a beer.

DUMPTY. We have native or imported, sir. (Doctor

goes upstairs.)

QUILLERY. Native will do.

DUMPTSY. Yes, sir. (Goes into bar.)

DOCTOR. (On top of stairs.) I repeat -- to me it is not funny! (He bows.) You will excuse me.

Act One, page 23 - *Idiot's Delight*

by Robert E. Sherwood

CONCEPTS TO CONSIDER THE ENEMY

Doctor. *Enemy, eh? And who is that?*

Captain. *I don't quite know, yet. The map of Europe supplies us with a wide choice of opponents. I suppose, in due time, our government will announce its selection - and we shall know just whom we are to shoot at.*

ISOLATIONISM

Mrs. Cherry. *We've been trying hard not to know anything - or not to give a damn. But it isn't easy.*

NATIONALISM

Weber. *They shout bravely about something they call "national honor"! And what does it amount to? Mistrust of the motives of everyone else!*

ALLEGORY

Mrs. Cherry. *Jimmy's been out in Australia, doing colossal murals for some government building. He won't show me the photographs of them, but I'm sure they're simply awful.*

Cherry. *They're allegorical.*

CLASSROOM PREPARATION

Presented by an Institute educator, the program traces the creation of the production, introduces characters, and explores the responsibilities of audience members through an interactive Power Point presentation. To arrange: call **(518) 274-3286** or e-mail **cbs@nysti.org**. There is a nominal travel fee for this program.

...after the performance

WRITING AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Teachers may select one of the following excerpts from *Idiot's Delight* to begin a class discussion or prompt a writing exercise.

•

Quillery. *There is one antidote for war - Revolution! And the cause of Revolution gains steadily in strength.*

•

Quillery. *If I let my speech run away with me, it is because I have a hatred for certain things. And you should hate them, too. They are the things that make us blind -- and ignorant, and dirty.*

•

Doctor. *You are a soldier and indifferent to death.*

•

Captain. *I am as powerless as you are, Mr. Van. I, too, am a pawn.*

•

Harry. *It's made me sure that no matter how much the meek may be bulldozed or gypped they will eventually inherit the earth.*

•

Weber. *There is only one way to account for it, my dear ... Spontaneous combustion of the dictatorial age.*

•

Irene. *Everybody can be nobody by merely removing their masks.*

•

Irene. *Poor, dear God. Playing Idiot's Delight. The*

game that never means anything, and never ends.

•

Dumpty. *But it doesn't make much difference who your masters are. When you get used to them, they're all the same.*

•

Irene. *Oh, yes, you are. You are just like all of them - an ingenuous, sentimental idealist. You believe in the goodness of human nature, don't you?*

•

Irene. *If you came from an older culture, you would realize that men like Monsieur Weber are necessary to civilization.*

•

Quillery. *England and France are fighting for the hopes of mankind!*

•

Harry. *Sure, and a minute ago, England was a butcher in a dress suit. Now we're Allies!*

USING THE THEATRE EXPERIENCE TO MAKE INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Here's a list of activities connecting *Idiot's Delight* to **NYS Education Department Learning Standard** for that particular curriculum.

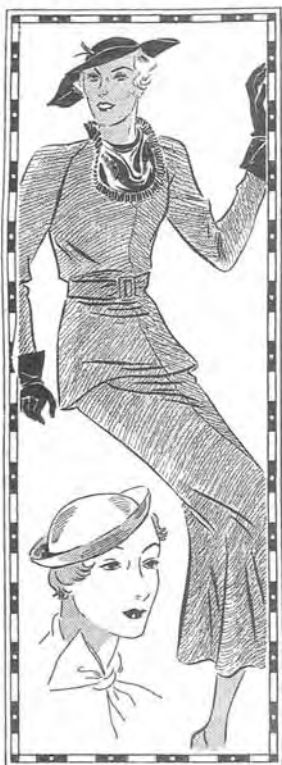
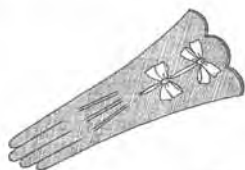
SOCIAL STUDIES

- Captain. *I am sure of that, Dr. Waltersee. The two great Fascist states stand together, against the world.*

Investigate the history of fascism and its impact on the world in the 1930s. **(Standard # 2)**

- Harry. *Yeah, I heard rumors - you mean like that business in Spain?* Investigate the political climate of Spain in the 1920s and early 1930s. **(Standard # 2)**

- Irene. *How thrilling it must be in Paris at this moment!*



Costume research from *Fashions of the Thirties* arranged by Carol Belanger Grafton.

Just like 1914. Research what Paris was like in 1914.
(Standard #2)

- Quillery. *I was attending a Labor Congress* -. Research these gatherings and the reasons for their popularity in the 1930s. **(Standard #2)**

MATHEMATICS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

- Harry. *What's your scale of prices?*

Pittaluga. *From fifty lira up.*

Don. *That's about five dollars a day.*

Compute the present value of five dollars in terms of Euros. **(Standard # 1)**

- Quillery. *It is on the wireless - everywhere.* Research the methods of communication used in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Which methods are still used today?
(Standard #2)

- Quillery. *Italian planes dropped twenty thousand kilos of bombs on Paris.* Compute the equivalent amount in pounds. **(Standard # 1)**

HEALTH, PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND HOME ECONOMICS

- Cherry. *We ate everything - up to and including the zabaglione.* Research this Italian dessert. Try making it.
(Standard # 1)

- Harry. *Your Maxie Ford is lack luster* - Research the popular dances of this time period. **(Standard # 1)**

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

- Examine the literary genre of allegory. What authors have used allegory ? **(Standard # 1)**

- Doctor. *You are familiar with the writings of Thomas Mann.* Research this author and determine the relevance of this reference to the production. **(Standard # 2)**

- Irene refers to Weber's insomnia with an allusion to *Macbeth*. Why is this appropriate? **(Standard # 1)**

- Read *What Price Glory* and compare the attitudes towards war with those expressed by *Idiot's Delight*. **(Standard # 3)**

THE ARTS

- Harry. *I used to play the piano in picture theatres - when that was the only kind of sound they had - except peanuts.* Research the movies of the 1920s. Who were the stars? Why was a piano player a necessity? **(Standard # 1)**

- Investigate the Bauhaus style of architecture and the life and works of Walter Gropius. **(Standard # 4)**

- Irene. *When I was a little girl my father used to engage Chaliapin to come often to our house.* Research this Russian singer. **(Standard # 1)**

- Research the development of the Federal Theatre and its impact on the plays, directors, and actors. **(Standard # 4)**

- Listen to the popular songs of the early 30s. Do any of the lyrics reflect the tenor of the times? **(Standard # 4)**

- Investigate the art of Mondrian, Calder, Picasso, Dali, and Miró. **(Standard # 3)**

CHARACTER EDUCATION CONNECTION

Weber. *What an engaging fancy you have, my dear. It is the quality in you that fascinates me most. Limitless imagination! It is what has made you such an admirable, brilliant liar.*

How does the lack of honesty affect the various characters in the play? What are the consequences of their lies? Are they lying to themselves? How is self-delusion reflected in the actions and remarks of Harry, Quillery, Irene, Weber, and Navadel?

•

Mrs. Cherry. *We have to make the world a decent place for heroes to live in.*

What are the characteristics of a hero? Do any of the characters in *Idiot's Delight* exhibit heroic characteristics?

•

Which characters exhibit the following traits? How are these traits indicated in their actions and dialogue?

Greed

Fear

Stupidity

Idealism

SUGGESTED READING AND RESOURCES

Plays by Robert E. Sherwood

Abe Lincoln In Illinois

The Petrified Forest

Reunion In Vienna

Small War On Murray Hill

There Shall Be No Night

Websites to visit

www.historyworld.net

[www.teacheroz.com / ww1.htmlmaps](http://www.teacheroz.com/ww1.htmlmaps)

[www.zum.de / whkmla / region / italy / italy192225.html](http://www.zum.de/whkmla/region/italy/italy192225.html)

[www.historyguide.org / europe / duce.html](http://www.historyguide.org/europe/duce.html)

[www.artsmia.org / modernism / timeline](http://www.artsmia.org/modernism/timeline)

...preparing for the theatre

BEFORE YOU ATTEND:

1. Define and discuss the terms: actor, costume, set, properties, lights, playwright, character, plot, act, and scene, director, production, cast, intermission, and stage manager.
2. Review the play's circumstances, including details of the action, time, and place.
3. Familiarize yourself with production background information in this study guide.

DURING THE PERFORMANCE:

1. As an audience member, you accept the responsibility of a special agreement. That agreement includes believing what you see is real. It is happening before your eyes.
2. You are the audience. In theatre, the audience has an important role in the experience. *Listen carefully and quietly.* Let the drama unfold and capture you.
3. A rapport between the actors and audience is established during a performance. The actors are aware of your presence. Your responses can stimulate or stifle the show. When the lights go down, a performance especially for you begins, an opportunity that only live theatre provides.

AFTER YOU ATTEND:

1. What was your reaction to the play? Did you learn anything about people and human behavior? How did you feel about the play's conclusion?
2. How was the action executed? What were some of the dramatic conventions used? Were the actors believable? Did the technical aspects move the show along?
3. Explore the following through discussion, a writing assignment, or perhaps an acting workshop:
 - A. Imagine yourself as a character in the show.
 - B. Continue the play action, creating the next scene.
 - C. Design your own production.



We believe in the potential of youth.

We take pride in our support for programs that introduce the arts to the young people of our communities. The arts unlock doors to creativity and create new opportunities for learning.

We are pleased to support The New York State Theatre Institute.



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