

# SOMETHING TO KEEP US WARM

A ONE-ACT PLAY BY  
*Stephen Gregg*



**CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE**

## Introduction

*Something To Keep Us Warm* is a heartbreaking and hilarious one-act. How does a family deal with watching one of their own disappear?

## Playwright Bio

Stephen Gregg's play *This Is a Test* helped define a genre of one-acts when it appeared in 1988, and it continues to be one of the most produced one-act plays in the country. Since then, he has published more than 20 plays for secondary schools to perform, including *Small Actors*, *One Lane Bridge*, *The New Margo*, *S.P.A.R.*, *Twitch*, and *Wake-Up Call*. His full-length play *Crush* appeared on the mainstage of the International Thespian Festival in 2016, and *Trap* appeared on the main stage of the festival in 2018. He has received a Jerome Fellowship from the Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis, the Actors Theatre of Louisville's Heideman Award for best 10-minute play (*A Private Moment*), and the International Thespian Society's Founders Award for service to youth and theatre. *Crush* was developed during a residency at the William Inge Center for the Arts. He is a member of the Writers Guild America West and Lab Twenty6 writers group. Gregg teaches himself to write plays, one tweet at a time. He lives with his husband, Todd, in Venice Beach, California.

## Synopsis

Norma is running out of time. Thanksgiving Trick or Treat is upon her and the tablesweat isn't finished and she can't remember which of her daughters is older. How does a family deal with watching one of their own disappear? This is a theatrical representation of what it's like to watch someone deal with a brain tumor.

## Characters

**NORMA TUFFLER:** Early 40s. Though it's never explicit, Norma's dying of a brain tumor. Mother to Mince and Elodie.

**GABRIEL TUFFLER:** Early 40s. Father to Mince and Elodie.

**MINCE TUFFLER:** 16. A tad on the quiet side.

**ELODIE TUFFLER:** 14. Always assertive. At the moment, aggressive. Angry and grieving over her mother's illness.

**FIVE GHOSTS:** All different from one another. When one sees them, one has some idea of what they looked like in life. They're different shapes and sizes, or colors. There's often a tell: one wears glasses, or carries a stuffed bear. You get the idea. Ghosts are a signal that death approaches.

**TRICK OR TREATERS:** Offstage Voices. One of them is an adult.

## Themes

Adolescence, Death, Family, Illness/Health, Memory, Parenting/Family

**Note:** This play deals with death and many of the questions and activities ask students to discuss and reflect on death. You may have students who have recently experienced the death of a loved one for whom this discussion would be too much. Before you dive into studying this play, make sure you let students know what's coming and pay attention to any serious emotional reactions.

## Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What is your relationship like with your family?
- ★ What is your relationship like with your parents?
- ★ What is your relationship like with your siblings?
- ★ Is there anything about your family you wish you could change?
- ★ Has your family ever gone through a death?
- ★ What do you think happens after death?
- ★ Have you had to deal with the death of someone close to you?
- ★ Do you know what happens to someone when they have a brain tumor?
- ★ Do you know anyone who has had to deal with memory loss?

- ★ What's your memory like?
- ★ Do memories count? How important is it to be remembered?

## **Pre-Read Activities**

### **Research Project: Memory Loss**

- ★ In small groups students will research what it's like to have memory loss.
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
  - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
  - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
  - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

### **Ghosts Scene**

- ★ Divide students into groups.
- ★ Give each group this statement about ghosts:
  - » Ghosts are a signal that death approaches.
- ★ Given this statement, groups will create a one-minute scene which includes at least one ghost.
- ★ Be observant as students work on an exercise like this. This will be an emotional topic for some.

### **Ghosts Monologue**

- ★ Students will write a monologue from the perspective of a ghost. How would you portray someone who is a figment of who they used to be in life, and someone who has moved on beyond life?
- ★ Decide why the ghost is talking and who they are talking to.

## Death Reflection

- ★ Write a reflection about your feelings about death. Consider the following questions:
  - » What do you think happens after death?
  - » Do you believe in life after death?
  - » What does death look like to you?
  - » Does death scare you? Why or why not?
- ★ Be observant as students work on an exercise like this. This will be an emotional topic for some students.

## Family Reflection

- ★ Write a reflection about your family. Consider the following questions:
  - » Is your family important to you? Why or why not?
  - » Is your family close? Do you communicate well? If not, why do you think that is?
  - » What family rituals and traditions do you have? Are there any traditions that you've been doing for as long as you can remember? Are there any traditions that you don't like?

## Family Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss three words that demonstrate how they feel about the word "family."
  - » Alternatively, you could have a class discussion to come up with a vocabulary list of words, and then groups can choose three words from the list.
- ★ Groups will then create a tableau for each of those words.
  - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?

- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class. Those watching should try to identify the words each group chooses to visualize.

### Thanksgiving Trick or Treating Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups
- ★ Each group will create a one-minute scene with the title, “Thanksgiving Trick or Treating.”
- ★ Have students discuss what the title means. Why are the two events (Thanksgiving and Halloween) combined? What situation would create a combination of those two events?
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present. Discuss afterward: What are the similarities and differences in the scenes given that they all have the same title?

### **Close Reading Analysis Questions**

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it’s being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can’t highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Something To Keep Us Warm*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

**Read One: What is happening?**

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What time of year does the play take place?
3. What does Mince want Norma to do?
4. What holiday does Norma think it is?
5. What does the Halloween ghost remove?
6. What is Gabriel's job?
7. What does Mince want to do and has to ask her father about?
8. What is a tablesweat?
9. What is Elodie's costume supposed to be?
10. Why is Elodie really mad at Norma?
11. What is Elodie doing to the Trick or Treaters?
12. What happens when the ghost takes Norma's hand?
13. What is the key idea of the play?

**Read Two: How does it happen?**

1. What is significant about the actions of the ghosts in the play? What do they symbolize?
2. What is significant about the characters asking Norma to help them throughout the play?
3. What is significant about the final moment in the play? What does it symbolize?

4. Analyze Elodie's word choice and sentence structure. Based on her language, how would you costume this character?
5. How would you costume the ghosts?
6. In your opinion, why has the playwright chosen not to have the ghosts speak?
7. What is the significance of the line, "I gave them a memory they'll have for the rest of their lives"?
8. What is the main conflict in the play?

### **Read Three: Why does it happen?**

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Something To Keep Us Warm*?
2. In your opinion, why do the characters try to tempt Norma with sewing projects other than the tablecloth?
3. In your opinion, why was it so important for Norma to complete the tablesweat?
4. What is the playwright trying to say about family? Cite the text to support your answer.
5. What is the playwright trying to say about memory? Cite the text to support your answer.
6. What is going to happen next for Elodie? Why or why not?
7. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with your family with what happens in the play.
8. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

### **Post-Read Questions**

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?



- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ Which moment stood out to you the most? Why?
- ★ How have the characters changed by the end of the play?

## **Post-Read Activities**

### **Character Costume Design**

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

### **Staged Scenes**

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
  - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
  - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
  - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

## Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize it in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

## The Ghosts Perspective

- ★ Now that you've read the play, consider the situation from the Ghosts' perspective.
- ★ Divide students into groups and have them write an original scene from the ghosts' perspective.
- ★ Groups should consider the following questions as they work on their scene:
  - » Who are the ghosts?
  - » Where did they come from?
  - » Why are they the ghosts that have come for Norma?
  - » How do they try to communicate with Norma?
  - » Is this the first time these ghosts have signaled a person's death?

## What Happens Now? Reflection

- ★ The play presents a moment in the life of this family.
- ★ Have students write a reflection of what will happen in the future for Elodie and Mince. Put the characters six months to a year in the future and consider, given what they've been through in the play, where they are. How have they changed?

## Family Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will discuss the concept of family in connection to what they read in the play.
- ★ Based on their discussion and what they read in the play, have each group create their own theatrical moment about the concept of family.
- ★ How does this moment differ from what students presented in the pre-read activities?

## Legacy Discussion and Scene

- ★ Mince tells Norma that she and Elodie, Norma's children, count as her mark on the world, but Norma rejects that idea.
- ★ Divide students into groups and have them discuss the concept of a "legacy."
  - » Definition of legacy: something that is part of your history from an earlier time. A thing that someone leaves behind that makes a mark on the present.
- ★ Ask students to discuss in groups: What things serve as our legacy, as things we leave behind? Do memories that people have of us count? Is it important to you to leave something behind? In the world? In your school? In organizations you might belong to? Is the desire to leave something behind based on wanting to have changed the world, or on wanting to be remembered?
- ★ Based on their discussion, groups will create a scene to visualize and theatricalize the concept of a legacy.

## Playwright Process

*Playwright Stephen Gregg talks about his process writing Something To Keep Us Warm. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.*

1. What was the originating idea for the play? Where did you start?

The one-act started as a prologue scene to a full-length play that never quite flew. It was an attempt to show where that longer play's fictional family dynamic might have come from. Twenty five years after writing it, my father went through a sharp cognitive decline, and I flashed on a line that had been in the long-shelved play. Norma had described herself as, "just all there enough to know I'm not all there." The line's no longer in *Something To Keep Us Warm*, but the idea is. Read through a certain lens, this could be thought of as a play about struggling against memory loss.

2. What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

At first, all I had for the story was that the other family members were trying to get their mother to stop making the tablecloth. They didn't have goals outside of diverting Norma's sewing. And because *Something To Keep Us Warm* had been conceived as a first scene, it was open-ended. It set up problems that could be resolved later in the longer play. I needed a problem that could be solved by the end of the 25 minutes. As simple as it sounds, giving Elodie a mildly controversial plan of her own — to attend a party — was really helpful in figuring out who this family was.

3. As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play?

The end. Writing a short play that requires a big prop is an inherently problematic idea, but to me the tablecloth earns its place. The family gets wrapped up (literally) in Norma's creation, pulled together and kept warm. Norma succeeds, even as it's obvious that this can only hold for a moment.

4. What was it like to see the play performed?

It was lovely. I had the chance to work with Grosse Pointe South High School, who did the premiere, early in their process. When I got to see the finished product it was obvious how much work had gone into it. The cast members really felt like a family, albeit one in crisis.

5. Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?

First drafts! When I teach, I always tell students to vomit out the first draft; it's just ugly clay that you're going to shape later. But my dark secret is that the reason I'm so insistent about blurting the first draft is that I'm terrible about doing it. My fingers freeze when forced to make big choices. And I find it damages my self-esteem to write as badly as you need to in order to get out that first draft. By contrast, I love the second draft, when I get to feel smug as I fix the choices made by my "yesterday self."

6. What is your writing process like?

Every four weeks or so, it's my turn to present at my writing group: Lab Twenty6. Professional actors perform the work; they use the lab as their gym. That puts pressure on me to write parts substantial enough that they're not giving up their evening for nothing. Seeing them read the scenes shows me what works. Critique from actors and the other writers gives me ideas for rewrites.

7. What engages you about playwriting?

You're writing a template for other people to throw their talents at: actors, designers, composers, directors. Writing a play is a little like writing a pencil sketch that teams of people color in and improve. Playwriting is a way to have lots of contact with creative people.