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Zap Teachers' Guide • A play by Paul Fleischman

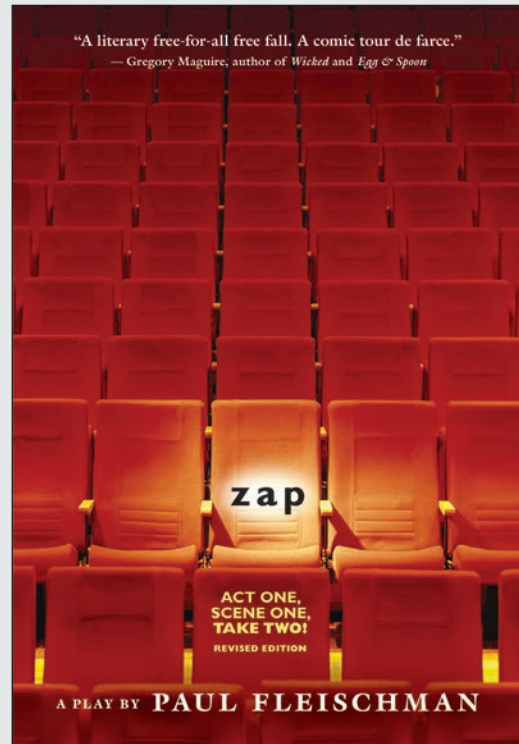
ABOUT THE PLAY

Zap leads readers, actors, and audiences on a wild and hilarious ride through theater history as seven plays collide to form an unforgettable spoof on life and social conflict. The play opens in 1916 with an English mystery loosely based on the works of Agatha Christie. With another zap of the remote, the scene changes to a comedy similar to those by Neil Simon. As the play progresses, Shakespeare's *Richard III* is zapped into view, soon followed by a Russian play modeled after Chekhov's, a play set in the American South in the style of Tennessee Williams, and an avant-garde play that recalls *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. Zap, and character Marsha launches into a performance art monologue that adds a modern-day touch to this uproarious farce.

Playwright Paul Fleischman has considered the advice of performers and producers and has refreshed and thoroughly updated this high school tour de force, originally published in 2005.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Born in Monterey, California, the son of a well-known children's book writer, Paul Fleischman grew up with stories and fell in love with words at a very early age. Yet he never really planned to be a writer. He explored various jobs, including short stints as a carpenter and a bagel baker. He eventually returned to the world of words by becoming a bookstore clerk and library aide. Then fond memories of his youth, when his father, Sid Fleischman, read aloud stories fresh from his typewriter, made Fleischman realize that writing might be a suitable career for him. He began to combine his love of music, his devotion to the past, and his keen interest in exploring new styles of writing into books for children and young adults. *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* won



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the Newbery Medal in 1989 and was performed on public radio. *Zap* is his first play.

BEFORE READING THE PLAY

Divide the class into six small groups and assign each group one of the following plays: *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Mousetrap*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Odd Couple*, *Richard III*, and *Waiting for Godot*. Instruct the groups to read the assigned play or a detailed plot summary. Ask them to prepare a presentation for the class that includes a concise summary, a description of the central themes and the setting, and sketches of the main characters. Tell students to think about these plays as they read *Zap* and make a mental note of each play's counterpart in Fleischman's play.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the difference between narrative and dramatic writing. How does Paul Fleischman make use of both?
2. It has been said that art either resembles life or departs from it. Since drama is an art form, discuss which scenes in *Zap* most resemble life. Which depart from life?
3. The main elements of drama are dialogue, story, character, and action. Discuss Fleischman's use of these elements in each play. Debate whether there is one dominant element in *Zap*. Which characters most resemble characters in the plays from the pre-reading activity?
4. Explain the term "drama of language." How does dramatic language extend beyond dialogue? Discuss the various ways Fleischman uses language. How does his use of language contribute to the humor of the play?
5. What is the symbolism of the remote control? Why is it an appropriate device to signal a scene change? How does it set the pace and timing of the play?
6. Discuss how Fleischman deals with the following themes: justice and injustice, weakness and strength, death, revenge, order and disorder.
7. What are some of the social issues examined in *Zap*? How do these issues reflect the time and place of each play? Discuss how these social issues are relevant today.
8. Explain the role of the house manager.
9. Why does Fleischman use a corpse in the play?
10. Compare and contrast the romantic relationships in each of the plays.
11. Why are there no character names in the avant-garde play?
12. Discuss the primary function of Marsha's role in the play.
13. Explain the collision of all the plays at the end.
14. In the production notes, Fleischman advises that "the straighter it's played, the funnier it will be." Discuss this advice.

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE THEATER EXPERIENCE

1. Ask students to work in the same groups as they did for the pre-reading activity. Then have them construct a time line of major events that took place during the period of the play they read. Display the time lines for the entire class to study and discuss how knowledge of these periods contributes to a better understanding of *Zap*.
2. Historical context is often discussed in playbills. *Zap* isn't set in just one historical period but in several. Ask students to look at the time lines displayed and think of a creative way to present the historical context in writing so as to give viewers a clear understanding of the multiple settings of the play.
3. Costuming or dress is essential to establishing a play's time and place, and conveying information about the characters, such as socioeconomic level and profession. Ask students to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to research fashion appropriate for each play in *Zap*. Have them create a sketchbook that a costume director might use to instruct assistants in locating the proper clothing for the play.
4. Actors' vocal emphasis, gestures, and facial expressions contribute to the success of any drama. Divide the class into several small groups and ask each group to dramatize the opening scene of *The English Mystery*. How does each group of actors bring something different to the scene? After the students have analyzed the speech and body language of each group performance, have them make the final cast selection for this play. This exercise may be done with each play represented in *Zap*.
5. Write a brief biography of each actor for an "About the Cast" section of the playbill.
6. Wit, satire, irony, parody, and farce are different types of comedy. Ask students to find the definitions and research the characteristics of these comic forms and then write a brief paper explaining which types of comedy Fleischman is presenting in *Zap*. Have them use scenes and dialogue from the play to support their conclusions.

7. Ask students to transform *Zap* into a semi-musical. Select one song to be sung in each play. Allow students to share their musical selections in class and explain which characters would perform the songs and in which scenes. How do the musical selections make this comedy funnier?
8. Have students research Paul Fleischman's life, career, and views toward writing. Then have them write an interview with Fleischman that might appear at the beginning or end of the play. Include his reasons for wanting to write a comedy for the stage. Fleischman's official website, www.paulfleischman.net, is one possible resource.
9. Ask students to write a brief paper that discusses the role they would most want to play in *Zap*.
10. Have students read reviews in the *New York Times* (www.nytimes.com) of current plays on Broadway or Off Broadway and look closely at the elements of the reviews. Then have them write a review of *Zap*.

CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to write a short paper that draws a parallel between one of the six plays from the pre-reading activity and its counterpart in *Zap*.
2. A key element in *Zap* is how the playwright borrows from seven distinct elements and creates a new whole, which is very much like what hip-hop artists and DJs do when they remix and sample music. In effect, Fleischman is sampling plays to create a new play. Ask students to create a playlist that uses seven musical styles but adds up to something all their own. The list should first present the seven parts, then sample them. Their lists could, alternatively, be based on seven characters speaking. Students can adapt this activity to film or collage if they prefer. Have the students present their projects to the class.

Discussion questions might include:

- How do the parts and the whole interact?
- How are *Zap* and their mixing projects similar to hip-hop, and how are they different?
- How are they similar to and different from TV channel surfing?
- What do sampling, mixing, and channel surfing tell us about our culture today?

ADDITIONAL FILM RESOURCES

You can't get a joke if you don't know the references.

— Paul Fleischman

SAMUEL BECKETT

Beckett on Film (2003). A four-disc series containing *Waiting for Godot* and eighteen other Beckett plays

ANTON CHEKHOV

The Cherry Orchard (1999) • *Three Sisters* (1970)
The Seagull (1975)

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Murder on the Orient Express (1974) • *Death on the Nile* (1978)
Witness for the Prosecution (1957) • *Evil Under the Sun* (1982)

PERFORMANCE ART

Home of the Brave (1986). The master of multimedia, Laurie Anderson mixes music, projections of words, movies, and much more in her works.

Talk Radio (1988). Eric Bogosian puts his explosive stage performance of a badgering DJ on the screen, directed by Oliver Stone.

God Said, Ha! (1998). Julia Sweeney's funny and moving account of her encounter with cancer.

SHAKESPEARE

Richard III (1955, starring Laurence Olivier)

NEIL SIMON

The Odd Couple (1968) • *The Sunshine Boys* (1975)
Brighton Beach Memoirs (1986) • *Biloxi Blues* (1988)

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

The Glass Menagerie (1973, 1987) • *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958)
A Streetcar Named Desire (1951) • *The Night of the Iguana* (1964)

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