

SWEEP UNDER RUG:
COMPETITION VERSION

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT BY
Lindsay Price



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

In the future, struggling families must follow strict guidelines. But what happens when people want to think for themselves?

Background

Sweep Under Rug: Competition Version is a shortened version of the original play with an added ensemble. The original play shared top prize in NYC's TADA! Youth Theatre's Annual One-Act Playwriting Contest.

Playwright Bio

Lindsay Price has been involved with theatre education for over 25 years as a playwright, adjudicator, workshop instructor, resource writer, curriculum supervisor, professional development creator, and keynote speaker. Her plays have been performed in schools all over the world with over 1000 productions a year.

Synopsis

In the future, a class war has confined the poor to "The City" and placed struggling families in the Bobby Sue program. Bobby Sue tells its owners when to wake up, when to apply for jobs, and how to be good. Doesn't everyone want to be a good, shining star? There's cake for shining stars! Doesn't everyone want to be told what to do? What to think? But what happens when people want to think for themselves? And why isn't anyone allowed to leave? Initially, Ariel's family was happy to be included in the Bobby Sue program. But now things have changed.

Characters

COUNSELLOR KELLY & COUNSELLOR KADE (both AG): Mid twenties. Government workers, counsellor team for blocks 7A to 7E. Both believe in the program 110%.

CONRAD (M): Nineteen. Miranda's boyfriend. He hasn't seen her in a year. Revolutionary.

MIRANDA (W): Nineteen. Ariel's sister. A secret poet. Smart, but defeated. Her depression is such that she has lost a lot of her vocabulary.

ARIEL (W): Sixteen. Younger sister. Very smart. People pleaser. Believes in the program.

BOBBY SUE (W): No age, but looks like a fresh-faced teen from the 50s dressed in a blouse, skirt, white knee-high socks, and Mary Jane shoes. She looks clean, fresh, and starched. A highly advanced computer. Moves mechanically but should never speak like a robot.

MR/MRS/MX CURRIE (AG): Ariel's teacher. They want the best for Ariel. This role is identified as "Mr." Currie in the script. Please change to whatever gender works best for your situation.

ENSEMBLE: The revolutionaries, the inhabitants, the crowd, the students, the lost of this world.

Themes

Poverty, Economic Issues, Class struggle, Morality, Right vs Wrong, Good vs Bad, Censorship, Family Relationships, Individuality, Obedience, Personal Responsibility.

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What makes a person good? What are good qualities?
- ★ What makes a person bad? What are bad qualities?
- ★ Have you ever judged someone based on their background?
- ★ Has anyone ever judged you based on your background?
- ★ Do you ever take people at face value? Do you believe people are what they seem?
- ★ Is there ever a situation in which people should be obedient?
- ★ Do you like following rules? Why or why not?

- ★ How do you feel when you're not able to make your own decisions?
- ★ In your opinion, how do we solve poverty? Can it be solved? Why or why not?
- ★ In your opinion, what does the title "Sweep Under Rug" indicate? What does it mean?

Pre-Read Activities

The Happiness Robot

- ★ In groups, have students design a robot to make their life happier. What would that robot look like? How would they act? How exactly would the robot make their lives happier?
- ★ Groups will discuss and decide on the parameters of the robot and then present their findings to the class. This can be as an oral presentation, a scene that demonstrates the robot in action, or another approved form.

Quote Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will create a three-picture tableau based on this quote from the play: "People aren't always what they seem."
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Groups will discuss and decide on what three-picture story they can tell using the quote as source material.
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class.
- ★ Discuss with students: What does it mean not to take people at face value?

Title Scene

- ★ Tell students that the name of the play they are going to read is "Sweep Under Rug."

- ★ In groups have students discuss what they think the play will be about based on the title.
- ★ Have students create a one-to-two-minute scene based on their discussion in which they theatricalize their thoughts on the title. Everyone in the group must be involved in the scene.
- ★ Afterward, discuss as a class how important titles are for a movie, book, or play. What do they think titles need to convey? Do they prefer linear, straightforward titles (that say exactly what the text is about) or metaphorical, abstract titles?

Perspective Monologue

- ★ Students will write a monologue in which the character has just been told that they can't go to a certain school because of their background. How do they react to hearing this information? Is this something they already know? Are they surprised? Angry? Do they try to convince the listener otherwise?
- ★ This can be a figurative or literal free write. Remind students that in a free write, they shouldn't go back and edit; it's a stream of consciousness where the pencil never leaves the paper.
- ★ Once the time is up, have students reflect on what they wrote. What did they learn about themselves as they took the perspective of this character? Any new discoveries?
- ★ Have students share their monologue in small groups and discuss the pieces. What was it like to write from this perspective?
- ★ Based on the small group discussions, have students edit their free write into a monologue.

Research Project: Poverty

- ★ Divide students into groups.
- ★ Each group will research poverty in their area. For example, what determines whether someone is below the poverty line? What are the stigmas or stereotypes related to poverty? What are the statistics in your area? What is being done to counter poverty? What programs are available?

- ★ 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)

Ariel the Good/Conrad the Criminal Scene

- ★ Divide students into pairs. They are going to create a scene (either improvised or written) in which one of the characters is called “Ariel the Good” and the other is called “Conrad the Criminal.”
- ★ Based on these identifiers, how do the pairs see the characters? What personality traits would each character have? What would their conversation be about?
- ★ Give students time to rehearse or write their scene and then present them to the class.
- ★ Discuss afterward: Does calling someone “good” or “bad” affect your judgement of them? Have you ever had to change a first impression of someone?

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 *Sweep Under Rug: Competition Version* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. When does the play take place?
2. What is the easiest way to disable a Mach I and II?
3. What celebration is coming up?
4. What does Bobby Sue tell Miranda she has been chosen for?
5. What does Mr. Currie have for Ariel?
6. How does Ariel respond?
7. What does Ariel call Conrad in their conversation?
8. What caused Conrad to go underground?
9. What does Ariel and Miranda's mother do to Bobby Sue? Why did she do this?
10. How does Bobby Sue respond when Ariel says she wants to go to a Level Ten School?
11. Complete this sentence: "Why does wanting to be better feel like _____?"
12. What decision does Ariel share with Mr. Currie?
13. How does Bobby Sue respond when Ariel says she wants to be a doctor?
14. How does Miranda disable Bobby Sue?
15. In your opinion, what happens to Miranda and Ariel?

Read Two: How is it happening?

1. In your opinion, why has the playwright chosen for Miranda to speak in poetry? What does it represent?
2. Analyze how the two Counselors use language. What kind of words do they use? What can you infer about their character based on their vocabulary and word choice?
3. Compare and contrast Ariel and Miranda's use of language. What are their similarities and differences?
4. Research the names Ariel and Miranda. (Hint: they are both used in the same Shakespeare play.) Why do you think the playwright chose these specific character names?
5. If you were directing the play, how would you costume Bobby Sue?
6. What is significant about the line, "People aren't always what they seem"? Why does Conrad say this line twice?
7. What is significant about the line, "City students don't go to Level Ten schools"?
8. What is the significance of the final moment in the play? In your opinion, why did the author choose to end the play this way?

Read Three: Why is it happening?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Sweep Under Rug*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about poverty? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about the relationship between good and bad? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. Compare and contrast your own personal opinions on poverty with what the characters are going through in the play.
5. How does the author 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 scene stood out to you the most? Why?
- ★ How have the characters changed by the end of the play?

Post-Read Activities

Write Your Own Scene

- ★ Put students into groups and tell them they're going to write their own 1–2-minute scene that they would include in *Sweep Under Rug*. What part of the play would you like to explore further? One example could be what happens to Ariel after she leaves The City.
- ★ Once students finish writing, have them perform their scenes.
- ★ After the performances, discuss:
 - » What was it like writing a scene? How did you create your own scene? What inspired your scene?
 - » What stood out in the other scenes you saw?
 - » What was the hardest part of this process? How did you overcome that challenge?
 - » Did you enjoy being a playwright? Why or why not?
 - » What did you learn about yourself as you wrote the scene?

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play 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?

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 colors and textures would they choose?

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?

Line Tableau

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a line from the play, such as, "Why does wanting to be better feel like a bad thing?"
- ★ Each group will discuss and decide how they will visualize this line in a tableau.
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?

Family Origin Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will discuss the concept of family in connection to what they read in the play. What was Ariel and Miranda's family like before the Bobby Sue program?
- ★ Based on their discussion and what they read in the play, groups will create a family origin scene with Ariel, Miranda, and their mother. What was life like for them? Decide what happened to the father, or other parental figures. Point out to students Miranda's last monologue after her mother for some clues as to what life was like.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse or write their scene. They will then present.
- ★ Discuss afterward: What causes families to change? How did the Bobby Sue program change this family? What happened to Miranda and Ariel's father?

Playwright Process

Playwright Lindsay Price talks about her process writing Sweep Under Rug: Competition Version. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

What was the inspiration for writing this play?

Sweep Under Rug started out as a 10-minute play. I was writing plays for the Girl Talk collection. I had a "what if" idea of "What if a group of people were told what to do every step of their lives and what if they didn't want to be told what to do anymore?" I have a relative who works with poor families and she has often talked about the sense of despair that can happen in the community: this group is put in such a box that, despite their strongest desires to work their way out, they find themselves mired in red tape.

To that end I wanted to personalize the red tape, which became the "Bobby Sue" character: A walking, talking computer who tells the family she's placed with what to do, how to act, and so on. She looks and acts like a teenager from the 50s. I always go to this time period when I think of misguided perfection.

In the beginning, I had a couple of language twists I wanted to try within the script, some more “what if” situations: What if one of the characters has deteriorating verbal skills? Miranda, who is the embodiment of despair over what’s happening around her, shows this element by losing her vocabulary. I wanted to create a plane where her verbal ability and emotional state are linear and connected. What happens when a character simply cannot communicate as she once did? Her change and depression goes so far she can’t even form sentences. I also wanted to make Bobby Sue’s language as computer-like as possible. No contractions. No emotions. The Bobby Sue character is a parent of sorts, except for the loving part!

After trying to write the 10-minute version, I knew I had more to say and decided to expand the story.

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

The play received a staged reading, which made me come to a rather huge realization: the language I had created for Miranda and Bobby Sue didn’t necessarily work! The story was fine, the characters were fine, but the way they expressed themselves, not so much. That’s what you get when you answer “what if” challenges. Since I had never written characters in this way, I didn’t know how it would turn out.

This turn of affairs was a bit shocking for me. It meant I had to go back to the drawing board, which can be pretty depressing. But of course, this is the purpose behind having plays seen and heard — plays don’t exist on a flat page. They exist in the flesh and blood of action and emotion. And if they work on the page, but not on the stage, then it’s not good enough.

What I learned was that my intention was good but I needed to change the execution. Bobby Sue’s clipped computer manner slowed the play down incredibly. I decided to change Bobby Sue so that she would move in a mechanical way but speak in a cheerful manner.

To have Miranda speak in half sentences (to show her absence of vocabulary) didn’t come off the way it appeared in my head. I decided it would be better to have Miranda speak through silence rather than in a stilted manner.

The play was a challenge to write structurally and I’m quite proud of the final product.

What was it like to see the play performed?

Sweep is one of my most favourite plays that I've written. I love when it finds a home on stage and I especially love the discussions that occur with students around the themes. This was the reason I decided to adapt it as a Competition Version. That means it's shorter in length (most high school theatre competitions want one-acts at around 35 minutes) and it has a larger cast. I also added an ensemble. It's given the play more accessibility and an additional voice, which makes me even more excited for the future of the play. My hope is that these changes result in even more productions!

Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?

I adore first drafts. The act of getting everything on the page without judgment is freeing and fun. I fully embrace messy first drafts with lots of plot holes and things that need to be solved. And then you actually have to solve those problems in the rewrites, which is always more of a challenge for me.

What's your writing process like?

I love to write initial ideas down in notebooks. I always start with pen and paper. I keep writing notes and ideas and characters until I feel that pen and paper is actually getting in the way of my progress. That's when I know I'm ready to move to the computer and start compiling a first draft. I often start my writing process thinking about the play and letting it roam in my head for a while. So after thinking and taking notes I'm ready to dive into something more tangible.

What engages you about playwriting?

I love seeing characters live a story and I love watching it happen right in front of me (rather than be distant from the experience through a movie screen). It's an intimate experience and that is very engaging!