

LET ME IN

A PLAY IN ONE ACT BY
Sholeh Wolpé



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

Let Me In is about a Middle Eastern teenager navigating the American landscape.

Playwright Bio

Sholeh Wolpé is an Iranian-American poet and playwright whose work, according to Terrain Journal, “transcends the boundaries of language, gender, ethnicity and nationality.” Her latest play, *The Conference of the Birds*, premiered at the Ubuntu theater in Oakland, California. Sholeh’s plays have been a finalist or semifinalist at Bay Area Playwrights Festival, Eugene O’Neill National Playwrights Conference, Centenary Stage Women Playwrights Series, and Ashland New Plays Festival. She is the Writer-in-Residence at University of California, Irvine. More information about Sholeh, such as poems, performances and essays about her immigrant experience can be found at www.sholehwolpe.com.

Synopsis

Jazmine is a teenager who has recently immigrated from Yemen. She arrives at the movie theater, late for her date. The teenage inspector who checks people’s bags for food, commands Jazmine to discard a piece of chocolate she’s been carrying around in her bag. Jazmine refuses.

Characters

TICKET GUARD: Male. Passive young man who is very involved with his phone (texting, looking at Instagram, etc.).

JAZMINE: Female. Mild-mannered Yemeni teenager with a slight accent.

INSPECTOR: Female. Aggressive late teens woman eager to assert her power.

JAZMINE’S DATE: A teenage boy.

MOVIEGOER 1: Any gender.

MOVIEGOER 2: Female.

MOVIEGOER 3: Any gender.

MOVIEGOER 4: Male.

GIRLFRIEND: Female.

Themes

Identity, assumption, stability, belonging

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What does it mean to be a “normal” teenager?
- ★ Have you ever been an outsider?
- ★ Do you feel you belong?
- ★ Do you know anyone who has immigrated to your area?
- ★ Have you ever made an assumption about someone?
- ★ Has anyone ever made an assumption about you?
- ★ Have you ever made a wrong assumption?

Pre-Read Activities

Research Project: Middle East

- ★ In groups, students will research what life is like in different areas of the Middle East: Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Palestinian Territories.
 - » What are the similarities and differences to where you live?
 - » What is it like to be a teenager in your research area?

- ★ 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
 - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences between the different areas.

Immigrant Assumptions Poll

- ★ An assumption is a thing that is accepted as true without question or proof. For this activity, all of the assumptions involve the immigrant experience. These are common assumptions about immigrants.
- ★ Ask students to share their opinion by standing to indicate that they agree with a specific assumption. State the assumptions and then repeat them so students can stand.
- ★ Assumptions can be controversial. Make sure to assign time for a post-activity debrief as students see how their classmates feel.
- ★ State the assumption and then say: Agree? Pause to give those students who agree the chance to stand, hold for two seconds and then sit. Then say: Disagree? Pause to give those students a chance to stand.
- ★ Possible Options:
 - » Most immigrants are here illegally.
 - » Immigrants have nothing in common with me.
 - » Immigrants take jobs.
 - » Many immigrants are criminals.
 - » Immigrants do not pay taxes.

Keep Out Scene

- ★ In small groups, students will create a one-minute scene.
 - » All of the characters in the scene are children.
 - » All of the characters but one are part of a club.
 - » The remaining character wants to join the club. What do they do to try to join?
 - » The others do not want this person in their club. What do they do to keep them out?
- ★ Groups must present multiple tactics for their want. The character who wants to join can't just say "let me in" and the characters in the club can't just keep saying "no."

Normal Teen Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss three words that demonstrate what they think it means to be a "normal" teen.
 - » Students may disagree and resist defining themselves in this way. The activity is included because that's all Jazmine wants - to have a "normal" experience like going to the movies.
 - » Alternatively, you could have a class discussion to come up with a 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 chose to visualize.

Outsider Improv Scene

- ★ Have a group of four students stand at the front of the class.
- ★ Three of the students only speak gibberish. The remaining student will speak English. This student will step outside, so that they can't hear.
- ★ Get suggestions for a location, and a problem to solve in that location.
- ★ The students speaking gibberish will then have to explain the location and the problem, in gibberish, to the student speaking English. How will they do that?
- ★ You can also switch the approach with which the student speaking English must try to engage the students speaking gibberish to find out the information (e.g., they do not want to engage).

Assumption Collage

- ★ Create a collage that visualizes the assumptions that have been made about you.
 - » Brainstorm images, symbols, and words that represent the assumptions.
 - » Decide what materials you will use to visualize the assumptions.
- ★ After you create your collage, write a one-paragraph description of the choices you made and why.

Assumption Scene: Teen

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will discuss and decide upon an assumption that is made about teenagers.
- ★ Groups will create a one-minute scene about the assumption and present. Everyone in the group must be part of the scene in some way.
- ★ Discuss the assumptions afterward. How does it feel to have someone make a decision about you without question or proof?

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 *Let Me In*, 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. Where does the play take place?
3. What does the Inspector motion Jazmine to do first?
4. Why is Jazmine at the movie theatre?
5. What is the thing wrapped in foil?
6. Where does the Inspector want to work after high school?
7. Why does the Ticket Guard take a picture of Moviegoer 3?
8. What happened to Jazmine's mother?
9. Who says "I guess that's why they call you a foreigner"?
10. What's the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. Analyze Jazmine's use of language. What kind of words does she use? What can you infer about her character based on her vocabulary and word choice?
2. Based on the way the Inspector speaks, how would you visualize her? What is her physicality?
3. How would you costume the Ticket Guard differently than the Inspector, even though they have the same uniform? How would you show his personality through costume? Use the text to support your answer.
4. What is the symbolism of the piece of chocolate?
5. What is the significance of this line: "Life is short and you simply don't know what's going to happen next"?
6. In your opinion, why does the play take place at a movie theatre?
7. The end of the play is not resolved. In your opinion, why does the playwright do this?
8. What impact would the ending of the play have on the audience?
9. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Let Me In*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about immigration? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about assumptions? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. What is going to happen next for Jazmine?
5. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with assumptions with what happens in the play.

6. 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?
- ★ How do you feel about Jazmine's experience?
- ★ How would you feel knowing it was based on a true story?
- ★ Do you side with Jazmine or the Inspector? Why?
- ★ How did you feel when the Inspector said "You can't just walk in here, our high school, this country, and break rules the way you do back where you're from"?

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 moment in the play. You should be able to present the whole play.
- ★ 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?

Character Physical Action

- ★ As a class, discuss the personality traits of Jazmine, the Inspector and the Ticket Guard. Create a list of traits for each character.
- ★ Ask students: How do we physicalize personality?
- ★ For example, the Inspector is described as aggressive. How do aggressive people stand? How do they move? How do they gesture?
- ★ Divide students into groups and give each group a character, without letting the other groups know.
- ★ Each group, using the personality trait list for their character, must discuss and decide upon a stance, a walk, and a gesture for this character.
- ★ Each group will present (they are all presenting the same character). Each person in the group will enter the space with their walk, take a stance, gesture, and then walk off.
- ★ Those watching must guess the character simply by looking at the physical action.
- ★ Ask students: Why do we need to give characters a specific physical action?

Playwright Process

Playwright Sholeh Wolpé talks about her process writing *Let Me In*. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

Why did you choose this topic to write about?

I have always been an outsider. I was born in Iran into a minority group. At age 13 I was sent away to live with my aunt and grandmother on the island of Trinidad in the Caribbean. Later, I was sent to a boarding school in the U.K., from which I ran away once or twice. I spent my entire teen life wanting to belong, but my accent, culture, and physical features always kept me on the outside. There is a reason “longing” is embedded in the word “belonging.”

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

My bag was searched at an LA movie theater by a lady in uniform. There was a “special” piece of chocolate in there I did not wish to dispose of. The lady insisted I should throw it away. I finally left it with her for safekeeping but when I came back for it, it was gone. The lady simply shrugged and said she didn’t know what had happened to it. The incident triggered the idea for LET ME IN.

What’s harder and why: ideas or rewrites?

Ideas swirl around in my head for a long time before I even put pen to paper. I write the whole thing in my head first. So by the time I sit to write, it pours out like cream. However, edits and rewrites are what make a piece effective. Think of the initial draft of a play as the raw ingredients of a great meal. However, the flavor and aroma of the meal comes from how much of those ingredients and spices you use (balance) and your method of preparation. That’s editing.

What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

For me, the challenge in writing any play is balancing the elements of entertainment and provocation. Ideally, I would like the audience to leave the theater happily entertained but also challenged ideologically and/or emotionally.

Did you cut anything that you wish could have stayed in the final product?

No, I don’t think so. To add or subtract from it might disturb its delicate balance.