

ACTING UP
STAGE COMPANY
MODERN • MUSICAL • THEATRE

Producing contemporary musical theatre.
Inspiring Toronto audiences.



Study Guide for Students

Brief Overview

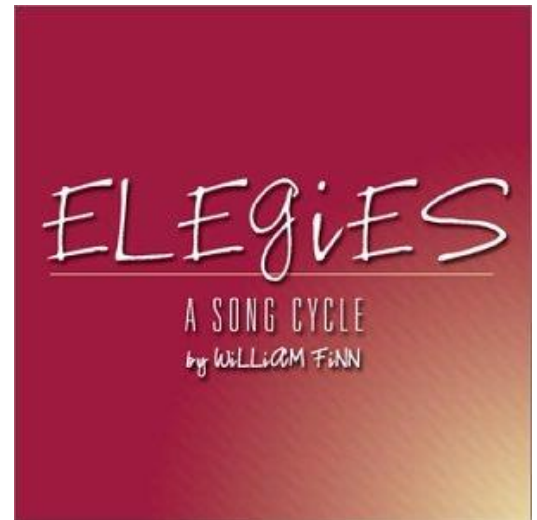
Study Guide Purpose

This study guide is designed for both teachers and students who will be attending Acting Up Stage Company's production of William Finn's *Elegies: A Song Cycle*. This study guide provides information on the show, the creators, the cast, some additional context and explanation, and various activities that can be completed to enhance the theatre experience.

Brief Overview of *Elegies*

How do we deal with loss in a post 9/11 world? Through the 18 stories told onstage, Tony Award winner William Finn (*Falsettos*, *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*) pays tribute to relatives and friends, long-lost pets, and the victims of 9/11, celebrating those who have passed on. Often hilarious, always touching, and very poignant, *Elegies* takes us on a musical journey that explores the modern world that we live in, and life's infinite joys.

Five singers (three men, two women) take on different roles throughout the cycle, sometimes assuming the voice of a friend or loved one, and sometimes inhabiting Finn himself. No matter how specific Finn gets—be it a street address, the name of a recalcitrant dog, or a friend's favourite vacation spot—these songs are as much about our lives as his. We see in each character shades of those closest to us, our family and our friends—the family we choose.



History of Acting Up Stage Company

Acting Up Stage was incorporated in May 2004 as a not-for-profit organization under the leadership of Mitchell Marcus. The company fills a unique niche in the Toronto theatre scene by producing intimate musicals at reasonable prices from Canadian and international authors that will attract a younger generation of audience members. Acting Up Stage has quickly become a staple company in the Toronto theatre scene, producing a reasonably priced, intimate musical experience that deals with thought-provoking themes and provides a theatrical experience for modern, contemporary audiences.

In 2005 Acting Up Stage produced the Canadian premiere of Jonathan Larson's *tick, tick...BOOM!*, the only show he wrote other than the hit musical *RENT* before his death. Andrew Lippa and Tom Greenwald's *john & jen*, also a Toronto premiere, received rave reviews when it ran in 2006. Since then, Acting Up Stage has produced the Toronto premiere of William Finn's *Elegies: A Song Cycle* in 2007, the Canadian premiere of Terrence McNally, Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens' *A Man of No Importance* in 2008, the Toronto premiere of Benj Pasek and Justin Paul's *Edges: A Song Cycle*, and William Finn's *A New Brain*.

Since *A New Brain*, Acting Up Stage has continued to pervade as an indomitable force in the chamber musical theatre scene. Earning rave reviews, 6 Dora Awards, 8 Toronto Theatre Critics award, and 32 Dora nominations for *The Light in The Piazza*, *Parade*, *Caroline, or Change*, *Ride the Cyclone*, *A Craigslist Cantata*, and, most recently, *Falsettos*, Acting Up Stage is excited to showcase this beloved musical with a fresh and honest perspective.

About *Elegies*

History of *Elegies*

Elegies began with the composition of “Anytime,” the heartbreaking song William Finn wrote for the funeral of his friend Monica Andres. “Anytime” first premiered in a January 2001 revue of Finn’s work entitled *Infinite Joy* (the title song appears in *Elegies* as well). After completing several other songs that same year, Finn began to write more around the theme of mourning in anticipation of compiling a song cycle on the topic. After September 11th, *Elegies* developed a more immediate purpose and meaning for New York and New Yorkers. North America, too, was reminded of the importance of public mourning. The ending numbers of the cycle, “Goodbye/Boom Boom”, and “Looking Up”, reflect this traumatic period and unite the musical’s arc with its emotional core.

Elegies opened on March 24, 2003, in the Mitzi Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Center. The production starred Christian Borle (*Peter and the Starcatcher*, *Spamalot*), Betty Buckley (*Cats*), Carolee Carmello (*Falsettos*, *Parade*), Keith Byron Kirk (*The Civil War*), Michael Rupert (*Falsettos*), and was directed by Graciela Daniele (*Annie Get Your Gun* revival, *Once on This Island*). Since its premiere, *Elegies* has been performed throughout North America in all the major centres such as Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago. It was fittingly chosen as the final work to be performed in Beverly Hills’ historic Canon Theatre.

Acting Up Stage produced the Toronto premiere of *Elegies* previously in 2007. It was recognized with two Dora nominations for Outstanding Performance by a Male (Thom Allison) and Outstanding Performance by a Female (Eliza-Jane Scott).

Main Characters represented

Mark Thalen, attorney and gay-rights advocate

Bill Sherwood, director/editor/screenwriter of the film *Parting Glances*

Joseph Papp, producer and impresario

Peggy Hewitt, character actress

Misty del Giorno, chiropractor

Jack Eric Williams, composer and performer

Ricky Ian Gordon, composer

Quentin Crisp, raconteur/actor/writer

Monica Andress, a friend of the composer

Bolek Greczynski, art therapist, creator of the Living Museum at Creedmoor

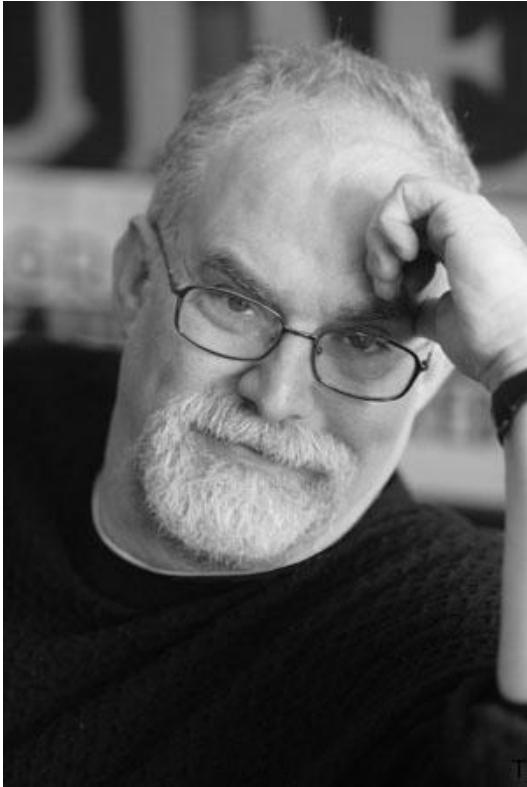
Barbara Finn, the composer's mother

Musical numbers

- Looking Up Quintet
 - Mister Choi & Madame G
 - Mark's All-Male Thanksgiving
 - Only One
 - Joe Papp
 - Peggy Hewitt & Misty del Giorno
 - Passover
 - Infinite Joy
 - The Ballad of Jack Eric Williams (and other 3-named composers)
 - Fred
 - Dear Reader
 - Monica & Mark
 - Anytime (I Am There)
 - My Dogs
 - Venice
 - 14 Dwight Ave., Natick, Massachusetts
 - When The Earth Stops Turning
 - Goodbye
 - Boom Boom
 - Looking Up
 - Goodbye (Finale)
-

Creator Bio

William Finn (Music & Lyrics)



William Finn is the writer and composer of Falsettos, for which he received two Tony Awards, Best Book of a Musical (with James Lapine) and Best Original Score. He has also written and composed In Trousers, March of the Falsettos and Falsettoland (Outer Critics Award for Best Musical, two Los Angeles Drama Critics Awards, two Drama Desk Awards, the Lucille Lortel Award and Guggenheim Fellowship in Playwriting). Mr. Finn wrote the lyrics to Graciela Daniele's Tango Apasionado (music by the great Astor Piazzolla) and, with Michael Starobin, the music to Lapine's version of The Winter's Tale. His musical Romance in Hard Times was presented at The Public Theater. Recently, he wrote Painting You for

Love's Fire, a piece commissioned and performed by the Acting Company, based on Shakespeare's sonnets. For television, Mr. Finn provided the music and lyrics for the Ace Award- winning HBO cartoon Ira Sleeps Over, Tom Thumb and Thumbelina, Pokey Little Puppy's First Christmas and, with Ellen Fitzhugh, two Brave Little Toaster cartoons. Mr. Finn has written for Vogue, Harper's Bazaar and The New Yorker. A graduate of Williams College, where he was awarded the Hutchinson Fellowship for Musical Composition,

Finn now teaches a weekly master class at the NYU Tisch Graduate Program in Musical Theatre Writing. His most recent projects include Elegies, A Song Cycle (Lincoln Center), The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee which had a three-year run on Broadway and has been produced nationally and all over the world, and the upcoming Little Miss Sunshine with James Lapine. For the past four years he has been the Artistic Head of the Musical Theatre Lab at the Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

Historical Characters

The following section explains the various characters that pop up in *Elegies*. Some are very familiar, some are quite obscure.

MARK'S ALL MALE THANKSGIVING

MARK THALEN was a “socially conscious lawyer who was an advocate for the disadvantaged and an activist for gay rights.”

BILL SHERWOOD's only success as a filmmaker was 1986's *Parting Glances*, a film about the last day of a New York couples' relationship. Though Sherwood never made another film, *Parting Glances* launched Steve Buscemi's career (he still counts it among his greatest performances), broke ground with its depiction of gay relationships and AIDS on film, and is still a cult classic today. Sherwood died in New York in 1990.

JOE PAPP

JOE PAPP founded the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1954. He fought city planner Robert Moses to build a theatre in which to present Shakespeare's plays for free in Central Park. Since 1962, over 4 million people have seen a production for free! Joe also founded The Public Theatre in New York which produces Shakespearean works alongside new plays. Joe's Pub, named for Mr. Papp, also opened onsite in 1998. The eponymous club has become an important fixture for theatre and cabaret performers in New York. Joe Papp died in 1991, at the age of 70. For more on his legacy visit www.thepublictheatre.org.

ROBERT MOSES was New York's city planner for much of the 20th century. No one had more to do with the way we think of New York or the way people live there today than Robert Moses. During the depression he spearheaded a massive swimming-pool building campaign that brought some joy and relief to crowded poor in New York. He also built many of the bridges that connect New York to its surrounding boroughs. Moses, though, was also responsible carving up neighbourhoods with expressways, banishing the poor to housing projects off Manhattan, and advocating for gentrification at any cost. He even once wanted to turn part of Central Park into a parking lot! In 1962 he argued against Joe Papp who wanted to build a theatre for the public. He lost. Moses died at age 92 in 1981.

PEGGY HEWITT & MYSTY DEL GIORNO

PEGGY HEWITT was “a popular character actress whose great success was “A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine.” Her girlfriend, Dr. **MYSTY DEL GIORNO**, was a skillful chiropractor with a large theatre clientele.

THE BALLAD OF JACK ERIC WILLIAMS (AND OTHER 3-NAMED COMPOSERS)

JACK ERIC WILLIAMS starred in the 1976 revival of the *Threepenny Opera*, and opposite Angela Lansbury, Len Cariou, and Victor Garber in Stephen Sondheim's original *Sweeney Todd*. Williams was also a gifted composer and lyricist. He wrote the off-Broadway musical *Romance Language* in 1984, and scored the 1981 slasher b-movie *Nightmare*.

RICKY IAN GORDON is a composer who is still very much alive. His opera *The Grapes of Wrath* premiered in 2007. Gordon has also written a number of song cycles himself, including *Genius Child*, *Only Heaven*, and *Orpheus and Euridice*.

QUENTIN CRISP, born Denis Charles Pratt, was an English-born writer, actor, artists' model, and raconteur, which is a kind way of saying he was an eccentric who gave a good soundbite. Crisp moved to New York in 1981, where he famously quipped that he "looked forward to receiving his naturalization papers so that he could commit a crime and not be deported". His dry wit is, too, evident in "The Ballad of Jack Eric Williams". Crisp's refusal to hide his flamboyant homosexuality has made him an admirable figure in the history of gay rights. Crisp died in 1999.

MONICA & MARK

MONICA ANDRES and Andy Feinstein were close friends of William Finn and his partner Arthur. Monica died of cancer, leaving behind her partner and two young children.

VENICE

BOLEK GRECZYNSKI was the Polish-born founder of the Living Museum at Creedmore, the first museum in the United States dedicated to the production and collection of art by people with mental illness. Begun in 1983, the museum is an "oasis for innovative therapeutic healing through creative expression". Greczynski was known in Poland for his political art and experimental theatre. He died in New York in 1995.

PASSOVER /14 DWIGHT AVE., NATICK, MASSACHUSETTES / WHEN THE EARTH STOPPED TURNING

BARBARA FINN was "William Finn's beautiful, smart, life-affirming mother who rejoiced in her son's talent and success but love him unstintingly simply because he was her son."

| <i>Other 3-Named Composers</i> | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Robert Sterling Arnold | Johann Tebias Krebs |
| Johann Christian Bach | Michael John LaChiusa* |
| Johann Sebastian Bach | Jean-Baptiste Lully |
| Ludwig van Beethoven | Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart |
| Jason Robert Brown* | Giovanni Battista Pergolesi |
| Christoph Willibald Gluck | Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov |
| George Frideric Handel | Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky |
| Johann Adolf Hasse | Georg Phillip Telemann |
| Erich Wolfgang Korngold | Carl Maria von Weber |
| | (does he count)? |
| <i>*These composers are writing contemporary musical theatre right now!</i> | |

Contextualizing *Elegies*

What is a song cycle?

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians defines the Song Cycle as “a group of individually complete songs designed as a unit for solo or ensemble voices with or without instrumental accompaniment”. *Elegies* fits this description perfectly. This section explores some of its forerunners.

Beginnings

Many composers in the late-eighteenth century were writing collections of songs, but these collections were often just groups of songs in a particular style—sort of like modern-day albums. It was Beethoven (of course!) who wrote the first true song cycle. *To the distant beloved (An die ferne Geliebte)*, published in 1816, has all the trademarks of a song cycle: it is a collection of six songs for a single voice with a piano accompaniment. The piano played a strikingly important role for songs of the time. The last song of the cycle also recalls some of the melodic material from the beginning, just like *Elegies*.

Writing song cycles was tough work for Beethoven; he wrote hardly anything in the two years before finishing his collection and never wrote another one. This from the guy who in a single year wrote a symphony, a piano concerto, a violin concerto, an overture, a piano sonata, and the longest set of string quartets ever composed! He must have learned a lot, though: *An die ferne Geliebte* marks his turn towards his mature style and the piece we know him best for, the Ninth Symphony.

The Romantics

The Lovely Maid of the Mill (Die schöne Müllerin), sounds more exciting in German, doesn't it?) was the first song cycle by Franz Schubert. In 1823 it was a huge hit. In fact, if you walked into any vocal recital today it's a good bet there would be a song from *Die schöne Müllerin* on the programme. It's easy to see why. Schubert's cycle was about a loner who falls in love with a hot miller maid. She rebuffs his advances in favour of a hunky hunter who drops by. Distraught, he drowns himself in the river. Dramatic stuff! *Die schöne Müllerin*, like *Elegies*, ends in contemplation of the life after in the form of a lullaby (Wiegenlied) sung by the brook the young hero threw himself into.

Romantics were very depressed sorts of people. Schubert's next cycle, *Winterreise*, from 1827, was about another guy who didn't get the gal he loved, so he wanders around feeling sorry for himself and contemplates suicide. Song cycles of this period were a bit like emo for the early 19th century. Schubert wrote from experience, however. His wild sex life as a youth got him syphilis, so he spent the remaining years of his too short life at home, in pain, and alone. Take that, My Chemical Romance.

Schumann had a much easier time writing song cycles than Beethoven. He wrote no fewer than four of them in 1840 alone (in addition to several other collections that were not cycles. All in all he wrote some 168 songs that year). His *Liederkreis* (song circle), *Myrthen*, *Frauenliebe- und leben* (A Woman's Life and Loves"), and *Dichterliebe* ("A Poet's Love"), like Beethoven's work before him, mark Schumann's turn towards a more mature style and a more free and dramatic use of the piano. Like *Elegies*, Schumann's cycles encompass diverse points of view that centre a main theme. The works, too, are at turns witty, wistful, or pained, but always soulful.

Modern Day Cycles

Song cycles enjoyed immense popularity throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It isn't a form that we come across too often anymore, but there are a number of classical and contemporary musical theatre composers that are writing song cycles today. Ricky Ian Gordon, the composer mentioned in "The Ballad of Jack Eric Williams", has written three song cycles: *Genius Child*, *Only Heaven*, and *Orpheus and Euridice*. Like the Romantics and Beethoven mentioned above, Gordon sets the poems of others rather than writing the lyrics himself, as William Finn does. This is, of course, the impetus for "The Ballad", as Gordon asks Finn for a lyric to set. Gordon's first two cycles set the poetry of Langston Hughes, one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century.

Jason Robert Brown, another contemporary of Finn (he was Finn's arranger for his 1998 musical *A New Brain*), sets his own lyrics. His cycle *Songs for a New World*, premiered in 1995. Audra McDonald recorded the song "Stars and the Moon" from this work.

As you can see, William Finn's song cycle isn't a new idea, but it certainly is a good one. Nearly 200 years on, *Elegies* proves the song cycle is still a compelling and relevant medium for musical, theatrical, and emotional expression.

What is a revival?

A revival is a theatre term referring to when a theatre company chooses to produce a show that has already had a major professional production. Generally, the company will re-imagine the show with a new creative team but will sometimes maintain specific elements from the previous definitive production (ex: most productions of *West Side Story* or *A Chorus Line* use the original choreography).

Glossary

Seoul - the capital of South Korea

Kimchi - spicy pickled cabbage, the national dish of Korea

Shtetl - a small Jewish town or village in eastern Europe

Passover - the major Jewish spring festival that commemorates the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage

George Washington Bridge - a suspension bridge across the Hudson river that connects New Jersey with Manhattan

Matzo - a crisp biscuit of unleavened bread, traditionally eaten by Jews during Passover

Acapulco - a city in Mexico best known as one of the country's oldest and most well-known beach resorts

Shelter Island - a town and island at the eastern end of Long Island, NY

Jean-Paul Sartre - a French philosopher, one of the key figures in the philosophy of existentialism and one of the leading figures in 20th-century French philosophy and Marxism

Discussion Questions

Listed here are a number of questions that may be helpful in fostering some discussion after you see the performance, about some of the themes in *Elegies*.

Questions

1. What role do songs play in a time of loss? Why is music an especially important art form for memorial services and remembrance? What does it bring that words alone cannot?
2. In the song *Mister Choi & Madame G*, the man sings about his relationship with the owners of his local corner store, the impact they had on him, and the loss he felt when they suddenly left. Can you think of anyone in your life that has suddenly moved away? A friend or family member? How did you feel? Did you stay in touch?
3. The song *Joe Papp* talks about the legacy of the Joe Papp (theatre producer and director who founded The Public Theatre in New York City). He was a champion for theatre and as the song says: "Joe decreed that theatre was essential to the welfare of our city". Toronto is currently in the middle of debates over the selling/demolition of certain theatres (St Lawrence Centre, Princess of Wales, Sony Centre). Do you think theatre is important for our society? If so, what can we do to make sure theatre stays thriving for years to come?
4. How do you feel the world has changed in dealing with loss since September 11th?
5. There are a million shows on television that deal with the topic of death (CSI, Law and Order). These shows concentrate on what the dead can tell us, what clues they've left about their deaths and what lessons we can learn from them. Why is it so important in today's society to allow the dead to speak?
6. *Elegies* is structured differently than a traditional book musical. What are the pros and cons of using each form? Do you enjoy one better? Or are each equally viable depending on the material being presented?

Class Exercises

Exercise 1

Creating something new!

Classes: Drama; Music

Goal: Creating a show

Elegies is structured theatrically in the form of a song cycle. A song cycle is a group of songs designed to be performed in a sequence as a single entity. Generally, all of the songs are by the same composer and are connected using central themes (in *Elegies*, these themes are love, loss, and remembrance).

For this exercise, create your own song cycle using the music of a popular artistic or musical theatre composer. As a class, research the songs of that particular composer and pick the songs to make up your song cycle. Each song should have a specific reason to be chosen and contribute to the central themes of the show. Divide the songs among the class into solos, duets, and group numbers. You can reinvent these songs by reading the lyrics for inspiration.

Exercise 2

Character Research

Classes: Drama; History

Goal: Character Research

For this exercise, choose a song from the show and research the character it was based on. William Finn wrote songs based on real life people and some songs based on characters he created from real life situations. Use the lyrics of the song as tools to help you research. Present your findings to the class.

Exercise 3

Using Poetry as a monologue!

Classes: Drama, English

Goal: Practice directing, Emotional arcs, Performing poetry rather than text.

Musicals are challenging to stage because in real life people don't walk around singing. The situations of many of the songs in *Elegies*, however, are very true to things that happen every day. Using the words to the song "Monica and Mark", get into groups of three and split up the text to create a scene.

Focus on these questions while creating the scene:

- i. How will you block the scene?
- ii. Will you have people playing Monica and Mark or is the whole thing being told in 3rd person?
- iii. You cannot emote "sad" for an entire scene. How do you stage this so that it arcs and uses different emotions even though it is all a sad story?

When you are done, present the scene to the rest of the class.

MONICA AND MARK

(William Finn)

In the hospital,

Waiting for Mark to get better.

Arthur and I met his good friends Andy and

Monica

Whom we had heard about for years.

Andy and Monica were in town to go to an opera
with Mark,

But Mark wasn't going anywhere.

So we sat in the lobby,

Incredibly slobby

And waited, We waited,

We waited,

We waited,

For Mark to get better.

Monica was getting upsetter and upsetter.

He said,

"Relax, Monica.

Take a walk, Monica.

Get some rest, Monica.

That'd be best, Monica.

Come on, we'll go with you."

But before we were outside the door

My doctor, Stubsy Forrester, asked what we were
waiting for.

And I said,

"We're waiting for our friend.

We are waiting for our friend to get better."

So he pulled Mark's chart

And bless his heart,

Stubsy sat down to explain.

He explained that Mark had AIDS.

He explained that AIDS was then fatal.

Something we did not know at the time

So as a group we began to swoon.

He massaged our shoulder blades.

He said Mark would die that afternoon.

He suggested that we see him soon,

Very soon.

Every Thanksgiving

Mark made his all-male Thanksgiving dinner.

Where men cooked the turkey

And men made the cranberry sauce.

So Mark died

And we became friends with Andy and Monica.

When they adopted their second girl,

They named her after Mark.

Zoe Thalen Feinstein

(Thalen was Mark's last name.)

And they asked us to be her godparents

Which we gladly became,

We became,

Yes, we very gladly became.

So we watched the angels grow

And torture each other.

But really we fell in love

With Monica the mother.

Suddenly out of the blue it happened.

Monica's losing her hair.

Monica's losing too much weight too quickly.

Sickly.

She goes to the doctor, says "I'm dying."

He says, "You're overwrought."

She says, "I'm angry as hell,

But overwrought is what I'm not."

The boy said, "Relax, Monica."

"That'd be best, Monica."

"You're just stressed, Monica."

"Get some rest, Monica."

She said, "Ah, go screw yourself" and went to the movies.

She planned her funeral

And these were her wishes:

She wanted, I quote,

That you sing a song you wrote

That'd make the people cry.

I'll write a new song.

Wait! I'm thinking.

(hums)

I'll write a new song,

And I'll play it,

Told from her point of view.

Maybe a mother singing to her daughter.

Worked on the new song every minute.

Minute the song was through,

Monica called and said it's time you visit.

This is the song I sang for Monica.

This is the song I wrote.