

MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

2015-16 SEASON

PLAYGUIDE



Q&A WITH THE PRODUCER:
5-time Tony nominee Tom Kirdahy on
the live-saving power of laughter

THE SCIENCE OF ADDICTION:
How our brains get hooked (and unhooked!)

MEET THE DANIELS FAMILY:
MRT's Artistic Director shares some
only-slightly-embarrassing family photos

JANUARY 6-31, 2016

THE WHITE CHIP

by SEAN DANIELS

directed by SHERYL KALLER

SEAN DANIELS
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



ELIZABETH KEGLEY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
TOM KIRDAHY

PRESENTS

THE WHITE CHIP

WRITTEN BY
SEAN DANIELS

FEATURING

JEFFREY BINDER

BENJAMIN EVETT

ISABEL KEATING

SCENIC & LIGHTING DESIGNER
JUSTIN TOWNSEND

COSTUME DESIGNER
CHINA LEE

SOUND DESIGNER
LEON ROTHENBERG

PROJECTION DESIGNER
AARON RHYNE

ILLUSTRATOR
JULIE FELISE DUBINER†

PRODUCER
EMILY RUDDOCK

STAGE MANAGER
CASEY L. HAGWOOD

DIRECTED BY
SHERYL KALLER

JANUARY 6 -31, 2016

*The White Chip is produced by special arrangement with THE GERSH AGENCY,
41 Madison Avenue, 33rd Floor, New York, NY 10010*



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PLAYGUIDE

THE CAST OF *THE WHITE CHIP*



JEFFREY BINDER
(Sean)

MRT: Debut **BROADWAY:** *The Lion King*, *Mary Poppins*, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (James), *Side Man*. **OFF-BROADWAY NYC:** Music Hall, *Romance/The New Testament*, *59E59*; *Dr. Faustus*, *CSC*; *Birth and Afterbirth*, *The Lieutenant of*

Inishmore, Atlantic; *Princess Turandot*, *Blue Light*. **REGIONAL:** *The God Game*, *Boeing Boeing*, Gulfshore Playhouse; *Bob*, Humana Festival 2011; *Love in the Wars*, *Master and Margarita*, *Bard Summerscape*. **INTERNATIONAL:** *Side Man*, London's West End. **TELEVISION:** *Damages*, *Law & Order*, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, *Guiding Light*, *All My Children*. **EDUCATION:** MFA, NYU. **OTHER:** Artistic Associate at Gulfshore Playhouse in Naples, FL.



Benjamin Evett
(Actor #2)

MRT: Debut **REGIONAL:** Producing Artistic Director of The Poets' Theatre; *Albatross*, *The Poets' Theatre* (Elliot Norton Award for Outstanding Solo Performance); *Broken Glass*, *Assassins*, *On The Verge*, *Camelot*, *Amadeus*, *Opus*, *Cherry Docs*, New Repertory

Theatre; *Freud's Last Session*, *God of Carnage*, Arizona Theatre Company & San Jose Rep; *Coriolanus*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, Actors' Shakespeare Project (Founding Artistic Director); Resident Actor, American Repertory Theatre 1993-2003.



Isabel Keating
(Actor #1)

MRT: Debut **BROADWAY:** *The Boy from Oz* (Tony Award Nominee, Drama Desk Award Winner), *It's Only A Play*, *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*, *Hairspray*, *Enchanted April*. **OFF-BROADWAY/ NYC:** Primary Stages, Atlantic Theatre Company, Rattlestick

Playwrights Theater, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Watermark Theatre Company, Repertorio Español, and others. **REGIONAL:** The Old Globe, Hartford Stage Company, Denver Center Theatre, Long Wharf, O'Neill Playwrights Conference, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Bay Street Theater, The Studio Theatre (D.C.). **FILM:** *James Schamus's Indignation*, *The Nanny Diaries*, *Life Before Her Eyes*. **TELEVISION:** *The Path*, *3 lbs*, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, Emmy Award-winning PBS American Masters *Judy Garland: By Myself*.



Benjamin Evett, Jeff binder, and Isabel Keating. Photo by Megan Moore

PLAYWRIGHTS' NOTE



I'll be honest. I'm terrified for you to watch this show.

But, I'm working to not let shame dictate any of the choices I make. To not let it keep us silent. To work to let laughter be the thing that brings us together.

To have no more silent deaths.

When I was trying to get sober, I looked for something current, something with a sense of humor, something about the now. But I couldn't find anything.

After I got sober, a thousand people came forward and said "Oh that's great news, I've been sober for twenty years", and while I was happy for them (and me), all I could think of was "Where were you when I needed to know I wasn't alone?"

So, now that I'm on the other side, I feel the need to write the thing I couldn't find, and be the person I wish I had found.

Which is really inspiring to say, but tough to do. Because of our old friend: shame.

I was nervous about the show going up at MRT, and I got this sweet message from our Producer Tom Kirdahy: "I remember when no one talked about marriage equality. NO ONE. And then a few brave passionate voices came forward. The world is changed for the better. I believe we can do the same here in our own way."

Every politician will tell you that overdoses are an epidemic—that the rate of people dying of overdoses is increasing exponentially—between 2012 and 2014 in Massachusetts it increased 88%.

In Lowell there are on average two overdoses a day. Just last week we had nine in 48 hours.

And yet, we don't talk about it, we don't say too much. Because of our old friend: shame.

So, this is it. My play. My story. My hope is that through the alchemy of telling the truth, great things can come from awful things.

I do hope you enjoy it. I do hope you find it funny.

And I do hope that no one produces it in 10 years because it feels incredibly outdated—because we have no more silent deaths.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sean". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "S".

SEAN DANIELS

Playwright and MRT Artistic Director

Q&A: PRODUCER TOM KIRDAHY

Tom Kirdahy is a lawyer and five-time Tony nominated producer. He is the Vice Chair of the Broadway League's Government Relations Committee and is a founding trustee of Berwin Lee London New York Playwrights, Inc., a not-for-profit committed to the art of playwriting.

He lives in New York City with his husband and his dog.



Do you find that Sean's stories are reflective of your own?

If I don't see myself in Sean's story, I'm not paying attention. Truthfully, EVERYONE who sees this play will find themselves in it. It's not only about recovery; it's about family and career and relationships and hope and change and determination. And it's damn funny.

So what do you think comedy brings to the table on this subject?

Comedy demystifies everything. It reminds us that recovery isn't drudgery. It's joyful. We do seriously dumb, sometimes very amusing things when we drink and drug too much. We need to allow ourselves laughter, or else getting better wouldn't be worth it.

What first got you excited about *The White Chip*?

When I was first given the play I wasn't interested because it had the word "chip" in the title and I thought that meant it was about computers. Wow, was I wrong! I read the first few pages and was riveted. I couldn't put it down. *The White Chip* excites me because it's a very funny play about a very serious subject. A subject that is near and dear to my heart.

Have you noticed the national conversation about addiction changing in recent years?

I think there's a lot less shame around addiction. Addiction is a disease, not a moral weakness. Thank goodness more and more people are recognizing that truth. As a result, our efforts at treatment and care can be far more effective. I hope *The White Chip* plays its role in furthering the national conversation.

"Coming out about my addiction

liberates me, and I hope it serves to liberate others as well."

You've been pretty open about your recovery from addiction—why do you think that openness is important?

I'm a gay man. I hate closets that enslave us. I was enslaved by my addiction. Coming out about my addiction liberates me, and I hope it serves to liberate others as well. If people who are struggling with alcoholism/addiction see others who are leading healthy, productive, happy lives, it is my hope that they will be inspired to get help.

What are you most looking forward to as this production comes together?

Most importantly I want audiences to be entertained. I'm looking forward to hearing audiences laugh and possibly choke back a few tears. If we do our jobs right, people leaving the theatre will likely discuss the play and hopefully those conversations will lead to more healing.

"We need to allow ourselves laughter, or else getting better wouldn't be worth it."

MEET THE TEAM

The White Chip's all-star team is packed with nationally-recognized artists at the top of their fields. Without further ado:



Producer TOM KIRDAHY:

Five-time Tony-nominated producer; his Broadway credits include *The Visit*, *Mothers and Sons*, and the revival of *Ragtime*.



Video Designer AARON RHYNE

Internationally-recognized video artist, who won the Drama Desk Award for Broadway's *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*.



Director SHERYL KALLER:

Esteemed Broadway director of *Mothers and Sons* and *Next Fall*, which earned a Tony nomination.



Illustrator JULIE FELISE DUBINER

Dramaturg extraordinaire for top-tier national companies like the **Humana Festival of New American Plays**, **Actors Theatre of Louisville**, and **Oregon Shakespeare Festival**.



Photo by Jenny Graham.



Playwright SEAN DANIELS:

Your friendly neighborhood MRT Artistic Director. He's worked for many of America's other great theatres, including Rochester's **Geva Theatre Center** and **Actors Theatre of Louisville**.

Photo by Meghan Moore



Lighting Designer JUSTIN TOWNSEND

International designer for theatre—in both lighting and sets. Broadway lighting credits include *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* and *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*.



Actor JEFF BINDER:

New York actor whose Broadway credits include musicals *The Lion King* and *Mary Poppins*.



Actress ISABEL KEATING:

Her take on Judy Garland in Broadway's *The Boy From Oz* earned a Tony nomination; other Broadway credits include *Hairspray* and *Spiderman: Turn Off the Dark*.

Costume Designer CHINA LEE

Esteemed costume designer, with over twenty Broadway assistant designer credits, including hits like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and *Newsies*.



Actor BENJAMIN EVETT

A powerhouse of the **Boston theatre scene**: Founding Artistic Director of **Actors' Shakespeare Project**, Producing Artistic Director of the **Poet's Theatre**, and decade-long Resident Actor with **A.R.T.**



Sound Designer LEON ROTHENBERG

Won the Tony Award for *The Nance* on Broadway, and was nominated for *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.



(the team has a collective nine tony nominations, including one win!)

THE SCIENCE OF ADDICTION: A FEW CONCEPTS

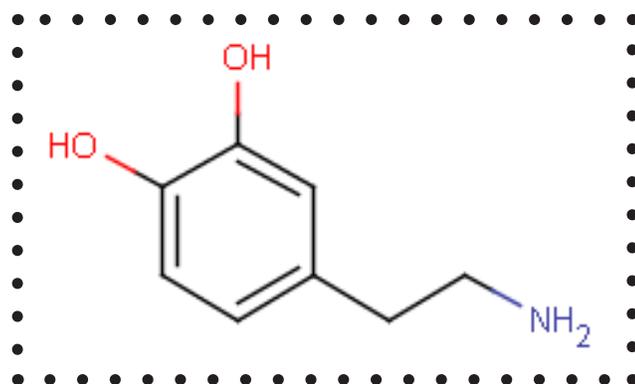
Our brains are messy things, and the science of how we get addicted (not to mention how we recover) is complicated stuff.

But here are a few concepts that start to paint the picture:

DOPAMINE OVERLOAD & ANHEDONIA

Dopamine is great: it's the chemical that, among other things, **makes us feel good**. Our brains release dopamine as a reward for doing biologically important stuff like eating or having sex. But drugs of addiction (such as alcohol) can make our brains release as much as **five, or even ten times the amount** of dopamine we get naturally.

Once we're addicted to a substance, the things that used to make us happy tend not to make us happy any more. This state has a name: **Anhedonia**. For an addict, it can eventually go away—but only with time away from the substance of addiction.



Dopamine Molecule



Neuroscientists delineate two separate systems in our brains, that tell us to “go” and “stop.”

STOP & GO

Think of your brain as having two systems:

- **One system tells us to GO.**

It's called the Mesolimbic System, it's centered around the bottom of our brain, and it gets us to do things impulsively that feel good and are important for survival.

- **Another suggests that, perhaps, we should STOP.**

It's in the Frontal Lobe, up behind our forehead, and it helps us to weigh consequences of our actions.

In a healthy brain, the two systems are in **constant communication**: we can balance what feels good (courtesy of the GO system) with what we know will cause trouble (courtesy of the STOP system.)

But in an addicted brain, **parts of the STOP system break down**. It **can't communicate in time**, and the GO system “goes rogue.”

So even though an alcoholic might remember, intellectually, all the terrible things that happened the last time they drank, at the gut level, they'll be compelled to do it again—even if they don't “want” to. It's why many addicts talk about their being a “monkey on their back,” and it's the answer to the ubiquitous question, “why can't they just stop?”

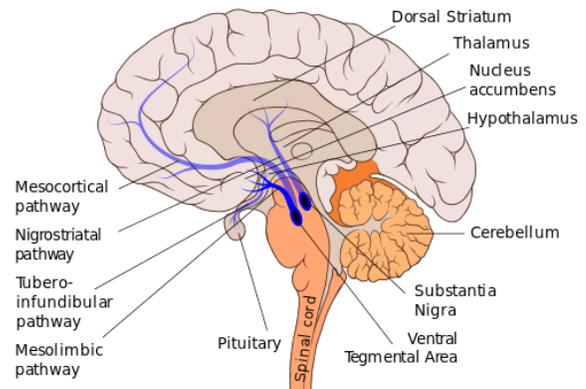
GENETIC PREDISPOSITION

Anyone can become addicted, but some of us are just genetically more likely to.

Case in point? **Alcoholic rats.**

In a 1990's study, Dr. Ting-Kai Li started offering lab rats **straight grain alcohol**. Most of the rats weren't impressed—but about **3% kept coming back for more**. So Dr. Li bred them together, and voila: An entire population of alcoholic rats.

They stumbled when they walked. They experienced withdrawal when their booze got taken away. They scurried back for more when it was returned. And they had all started drinking without anyone having to coax or reward them: **it was just in their genes.**



The brain's mesolimbic pathway, or "go" system.



Rats can be bred for a predisposition to become alcoholics.

PICKING UP CUES

An addict doesn't have to drink or use drugs to activate their dopamine reward response. Dopamine release can be triggered by things **simply associated** with their drug of choice: a smell, a picture, or even a location.

Not only that, but in those situations, the impulse to use *precedes consciousness*; MRI imaging of addicted brains shows that pictures of drugs trigger a response when flashed for as little as 33 milliseconds—shorter than a movie frame, and quicker than the conscious brain's ability to process it.

Sources:
Addiction (HBO Documentary): www.hbo.com/addiction
The Chemical Carousel by Dirk Hanson
The Thirteenth Step by Markus Hellig
National Institute on Drug Abuse: www.drugabuse.gov

SEAN'S TIPS FOR NOT DRINKING

During the play, the character Sean shares his ten tips for not drinking during recovery.

- 1** Don't drink. Perhaps this seems silly, but every weeklong relapse started with, "I'll have just one."
- 2** At parties/bars, go immediately to the bar, and get a NON-ALCHOLIC drink that you can hold in your hand. No one offers you a drink when you have one, and honestly, no one is actually paying attention to WHAT you are drinking. Second tip: arrive late, leave early.
- 3** You probably used to buy people a ton of drinks. You are still free to buy people drinks; in fact, when you go out, buy the first round – this way no one even knows you're not drinking, and who doesn't love the guy that buys the first round? That guy is terrific.
- 4** Always have a way out. Know you can leave the party at any moment. Don't get rides with people that are likely to make you stay hours after you want to. You'll end up drinking or stress-eating all the cheese.
- 5** Only go to bars when you have a reason to go there. Not for a place to work alone, not to get dinner. You're doing good, but you're not made of stone.
- 6** When do you tell people you don't drink anymore? It is completely up to you. I have found that people don't care as much as you think they do. I have several stories of people telling me "oh I'm so glad you're sober, I've been sober for 10 years" and then I say "how is that possible? We partied together for three days in Seattle a few years ago" and they say "no, you partied for three days in Seattle, I was just along having a good time."
- 7** You might think you're pretty smart—actually you probably are—know that we bury the smart ones all the time. Just because you can justify a few things to yourself doesn't mean it's not still a terrible idea.
- 8** Remember science. One drink sets off a chemical reaction that may be out of your control and rob you of getting enough dopamine for days.
- 9** Remember that you can have it all back. Everything you lost. You may not have the SAME of what you had before, but you can have it back. A job, a relationship, a family. You can have it all back, maybe even more. You just have to follow rule 1: Don't Drink.
- 10** More will be revealed. It's true.

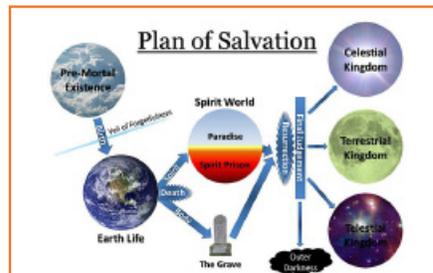
THE MORMON STUFF IN CONTEXT

Sean’s journey involves more than a few encounters with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, otherwise known as Mormonism. Here’s a little context for those unfamiliar:

PREMORTALITY

Mormons believe that all human spirits have existed for ages, even before Earth’s creation. “Premortal” spirits yearn to have physical, earthly bodies; thus our personalities develop before we’re even born. **Our premortal selves have a big influence on what our earthly lives look like.**

Premortal spirits even interact socially, and some Mormons believe that we choose our spouses, parents, and children in premortality.



The Mormon p[lan] of Salvation; human spirits move from premortality to various possibilities of afterlife, but must make stops along the way, including Earthly life.



The three kingdoms of heaven are often described as having the comparative brightness of the stars (Telestial), Moon (Terrestrial), and Sun (Celestial).

THREE KINGDOMS OF HEAVEN

There are **three distinct heavenly kingdoms** in Mormonism. (The biblical root of this belief is in 2 Corinthians 12:2, where the apostle Paul talks about a vision of visiting a “third heaven”; and the fact that the Hebrew bible always describes “heavens” in the plural (Shamayim).

They are:

- **The Telestial kingdom** (for serious sinners--though a paradise nonetheless—some describe it as a more glorified Earth),
- **The Terrestrial kingdom** (for those who don’t quite make the final cut), and
- **The Celestial kingdom** (for only the most righteous; compared to the brightness of the sun.)

One significant difference between kingdoms: Dwellers of the lower two may have to go without the company of the people they knew on Earth; only those in the Celestial Kingdom have the **guarantee of being with their families**. (The *most* spiritually exalted can go on to become gods of their own worlds--but that’s for another time.)

ORDINANCES FOR THE DEAD

Mormons believe that certain rituals (like baptism) are essential in order to reach the highest spiritual realms--so of course, anyone who doesn’t even *know* about Mormonism would be excluded (for example, **anyone who died before the Church began** in the 1800’s.)

Starting at age 12, you can be **baptized for the dead**: You get a *Recommend* (a sort of spiritual driver’s license) from Church leadership, and then fulfill the ritual as a proxy, so that an already-deceased person may ascend. (That person can then decide, in the afterlife, **whether to accept the baptism** or not.)



A traditional Mormon baptismal font. The pool of water sits on the back of twelve oxen, representing the twelve tribes of ancient Israel.



The LDS temple in Salt Lake City. Sacred ordinances of Mormonism are performed inside temples such as this one.

QUESTIONING & EDUCATION

A Mormon might emphasize a difference between *questioning*, and *asking* questions:

- *Questioning*--**challenging or disputing** theology--is discouraged, since it leads to further skepticism and doubt.
- *Asking* questions--**seeking clarification and context** for theology--is encouraged, since it leads to further enlightenment and logic.

Mormonism places high value on education, and sees secular and religious education as inseparable, emphasizing that **we take our knowledge from this world with us** to the afterlife.



Utah’s Brigham Young University, operated by the Mormon Church and with a 99% Mormon student body. Mormonism emphasizes the importance of education.

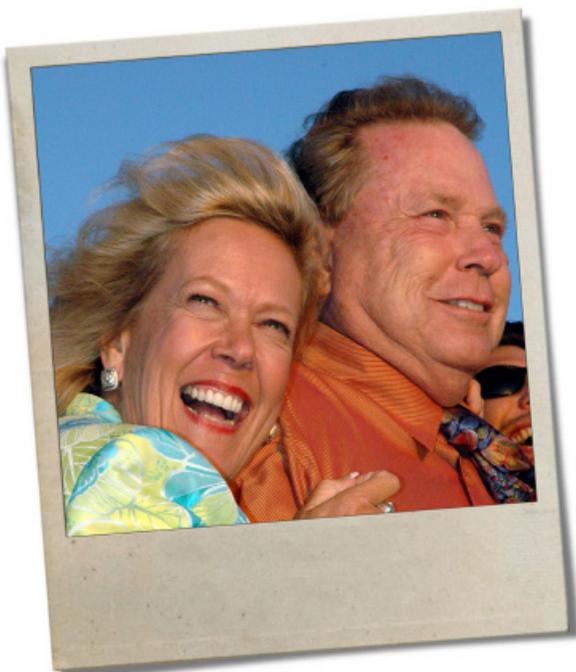
MEET THE DANIELS FAMILY

The White Chip uses projections and photos of Sean's real-life family from his days growing up.

So we invite you to meet the Daniels Family



(Left to right) Sean, brother Travis, mom Kathy, dad Dan, and brother Scott.



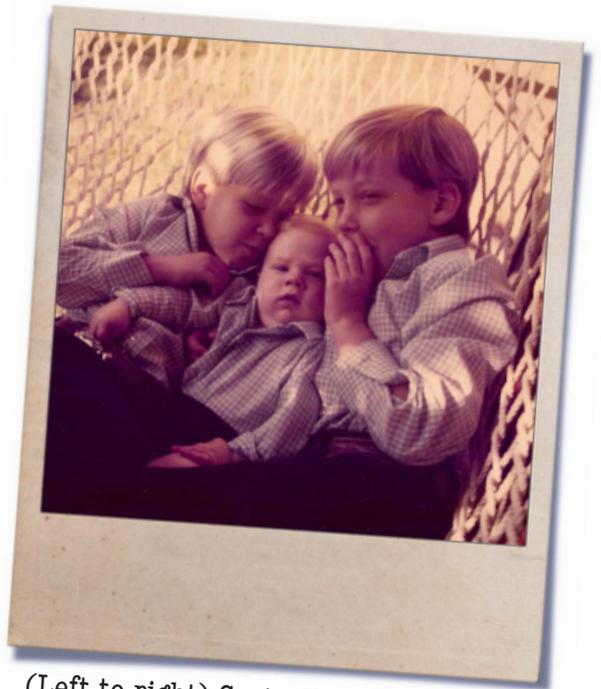
Kathy and Dan



Sean (left) and brother Scott (right) with dad Dan



(Left to right) Dan, Kathy, Travis, Scott, and Sean



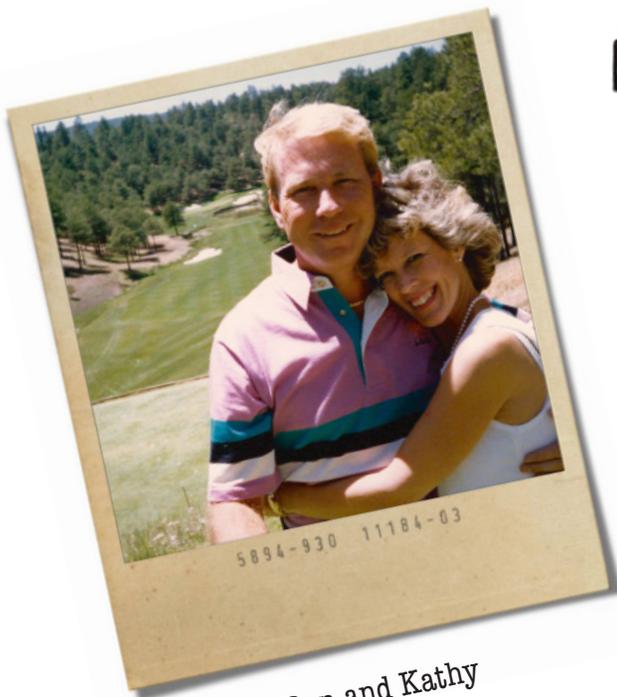
(Left to right) Scott, Travis, and Sean



Dan



Sean (center), his buddy Dan (left), and "some random girl" (right).



Dan and Kathy



Kathy, Dan, and Sean

GLOSSARY OF TERMS IN *THE WHITE CHIP*

BILOXI BLUES: Play set largely in a World War II army training camp barrack; part of Neil Simon's semi-autobiographical "Eugene trilogy."

BLOOD ALCOHOL LEVEL: The percentage of your blood that is concentrated with alcohol:

- **.040:** Most people begin to feel relaxed
- **.080:** Coordination deteriorates; maximum level for driving in Massachusetts.
- **.120:** Vomiting usually occurs
- **.200:** Most people experience blackouts
- **.400:** Many lose consciousness or die

BYU: Brigham Young University, whose student population is 99% Mormon. BYU also runs a summer camp called Especially for Youth--the largest Mormon camp, with over 500,000 participants across the globe each year.

DETOX VS. REHAB:

- **"Detox"** refers to a short period of medical supervision (usually a week or less) to get an addict through early stages of withdrawal
- **"Rehab"** is a longer program (either in- or outpatient) aimed at sustainable recovery.

EUPHORIC RECALL: The tendency to remember past experiences in a positive light, and overlook the negative.



LEISURE SUIT LARRY: Adult-themed video game released in the 1980's, whose action revolved around a balding middle-aged man trying to seduce attractive women.

LOYAL ORDER OF WATER BUFFALOES:

Fraternity in The Flintstones to which Fred and Barney belong, parodying groups like the Freemasons and the Elks.



MD 20/20: Brand of "flavored fortified wine," made with fruit wine, sugar, and artificial flavors; affectionately called Mad Dog. In 2014, thrillist.com ranked it third in the "Top 5 Bum Wines" on the market.

PIN LIGHT: In theatre, a narrow spotlight used to illuminate a small stage detail.

THEREMIN: Electronic musical instrument played by waving ones hands around a set of antennae, without making physical contact.

WALDEN POND: Lake in Concord, Massachusetts; source of inspiration for transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau, who called it a "lower heaven."



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you think is the best thing that Sean does, or happens to Sean, in the play? What do you think is the worst?
2. The power of the truth is a theme that comes up often in *The White Chip* is. Where do you see truth at work in the play—for good, or for bad?
3. Sean admits that at times, he had some pretty great experiences drinking. How do you see those fitting into the bigger picture of his story?
4. Do you think the play is anti-religion?
5. Most people believe in second chances, or even third chances. But do you find it harder to believe in fourth, fifth, and sixth chances?
6. What does “More will be revealed” mean to you?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING & WATCHING

THE SCIENCE OF ADDICTION AND ALCOHOLISM:

- *The Thirteenth Step* by Markus Hellig
- *Addiction* (HBO Documentary): www.hbo.com/addiction
- National Institute on Drug Abuse: www.drugabuse.gov
- *The Chemical Carousel* by Dirk Hanson

LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS WORKING TO FIGHT ADDICTION:

SMART Recovery® of New England: A resource for secular, science-based approaches to recovery: www.smartne.org

Lowell House: A long-standing resource for recovery in our city, with residential and outpatient programs: www.lowellhouseinc.org

Megan’s House: A residential treatment home for women that uses an “evidenced-based substance abuse treatment program that emphasizes individual dignity, self-respect and empowerment.” www.themeganhouse.org

MOAR (Massachusetts Organization for Addiction Recovery): A statewide initiative to “organize individuals, families, and friends into a collective voice to educate the public about the value of recovery from alcohol and other addictions.” www.moar-recovery.org

Right Turn: An Arlington, Massachusetts-based program that provides recovery care for artists and musicians, in a uniquely creative environment. www.right-turn.org

THANK YOU

Special thanks to the following for their help in putting together this playguide:

Sean Daniels

Brittany Hathaway

Tom Kirdahy