



# UNDER THE SKIN

**By Michael Hollinger**

**A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki**

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# ***Under the Skin***

**By Michael Hollinger**

**Produced by The Public Theatre**

**January, 2017**

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**A STUDY GUIDE**

**By Martin Andrucki**

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**THE AUTHOR.** (The information in this section of the study-guide is quoted from *New Dramatists and Playscripts, Inc.*)

“Born in 1962, Michael Hollinger received the degree of Bachelor of Music in viola performance from Oberlin Conservatory and a Master of Arts in theatre from Villanova University. Because of his background as a musician, [he has said that he] considers his plays compositions: characters are instruments, scenes are movements; tempo rhythm, and dynamics are critical, and melody and counterpoint are always set in relief by rests—beats, pauses, the spaces in between.”

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“Michael Hollinger is the author of *Red Herring*, [produced at The Public Theatre in 2003], *Incorruptible*, *An Empty Plate in the Café du Grand Boeuf*, and *Tiny Island*, all of which premiered at Philadelphia’s Arden Theatre Company and have together enjoyed numerous productions around the United States, in New York City, and abroad. . . . [*Under the Skin* premiered in 2015. His most recent work is *Touch Tones*, a musical comedy.] Mr. Hollinger has written seven touring plays for young audiences, including *Eureka!* And *Hot Air* . . . Awards and honors include the Roger L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center’s Fund for New American Plays. . . .Mr. Hollinger has been a resident playwright at New Dramatists and is [Professor] of Theatre at Villanova University.”

**THE SETTING.** The script tells us that the drama takes place in, “A hospital room, in Philadelphia. And many other locations. But always a hospital room.” In other words, while much of the action takes place in the hospital room, this location also provides the frame within which we see events that happened or are happening elsewhere. But the hospital room is always the context of these scenes, the better to underline the main action of the play: the struggle of the central character to decide whether to donate a kidney to her estranged father. Since the non-hospital settings come and go in rapid succession, they

are not fully realized physically on stage. Instead, they are sketched in with one or two items of furniture or a few suggestive props.

**THE PLOT.** The play opens at Raina's front door somewhere in Ohio. Raina, a white woman, stands in the doorway, while her father, Lou Ziegler, also white, stands outside. We learn that he and his daughter are on bad terms, she regarding him as having been a delinquent parent to her and a worse husband to her late mother. Accordingly, she is refusing to allow him in or to let him see his granddaughter, Lily, whom he calls Lila. Raina corrects him, taking his mistake as yet another expression of Lou's selfish indifference to his family. He protests, asserting that he was only "yankin' your chain." He proffers a gift for the child, "a mobile you hang over her crib." But here again Lou reveals the gulf between him and Raina, who informs him that her daughter is four years old, long past the age of mobiles and cribs.

As it develops, Lou's reason for being at Raina's door is neither to heal the breach with her, nor to get to know Lily. Instead, he is there because he is sick, needs a transplanted kidney, and wants his daughter to provide him with one. Raina, stunned by this request, sends him away without an answer: "I don't know what to do—I need a little time to think this over."

What follows is the first of what will be a series of parentheses in the action, in which members of the cast address the spectators directly for the purpose of "*working through something, using the audience to get down to an essential truth.*" In this initial parenthesis, Raina attempts to define the meaning of the story the play is telling. "This . . . is not about kidneys," Raina says. "*It's about the human heart. . . . The boundaries of the body, and the limits of love. . . . The place where I stop and you begin. . . . Flesh and blood. About what we owe to those who share them. And what they owe us. That's what this story's about.*"

The play's other characters—Jarrell, an African-American man in his late 20s; Marlene, his African-American mother; and, of course, Lou—have joined Raina in explaining the play to the audience. They reach their tentative conclusion, close the parenthesis, and resume the dramatic action, taking us back to the ever-present Philadelphia hospital room.

Lou is being prepared for dialysis by his nurse, Hector—played by the same actor who represents Jarrell. Lou badgers him for cigarettes, tells him about his own father, and reveals that he is a master woodworker who restores historic old houses. He is commenting on another nurse whom he doesn't like, when Raina arrives from Ohio, apparently having come to a decision of some sort about her kidney.

She learns that Lou is having problems with dialysis, repeatedly contracting infections that antibiotics are ever less successful in treating. This situation makes his need for a new kidney increasingly urgent, and adds another factor that Raina has to consider in making up her mind about her father's request.

Lou begins to reminisce about Raina's childhood, remembering that he would rub her back to get her to sleep. He would also sing her an unconventional lullaby, a song from Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera: Mack the Knife*, which celebrates the murderous career of the knife-wielding gangster for whom it is named.

Lou then switches back to the present, complaining about laws in the United States that prohibit people from buying organs for transplantation, and describing how he has tried to circumvent them. Having failed at that, he renews his appeal to Raina to become a donor for him. "When I came to your house, last month, you said you needed some time to think. . . . How's that goin'?" She replies that she has been compiling a document to help her in her thinking process, a list setting out Lou's faults in one column and his virtues in another. "You're *rating* me?" Lou asks in shock, "Like pickin' a *used car*—pros and cons?" "I need to know you're kidney-worthy," she explains, "you're asking for a piece of my body. . . . It's an intimate act. . . . It's not a thing a person does lightly." Especially not with a father who, she asserts, has left her emotionally scarred because of his selfishness and neglect. "*I don't want to die,*" Lou pleads, to which Raina answers, "Just be glad I came here—okay? It means I'm thinking about it. . . . That doesn't mean yes, but it's not no either, it's a . . . definite maybe." And at this point, Raina begins the medical evaluation process to determine if she is qualified to act as a donor for Lou.

Another audience-directed parenthesis follows, as Marlene demonstrates a piece of Lou's wood-working genius, a volute, the "curlicue, at the end of a handrail." "This is a work of art," she declares, "The volute is the heart of your home." So we learn that Lou is more than a selfish schemer and neglectful parent and husband. He's also an artist whose handiwork can supply a house with a heart.

Again the parenthesis closes, and we find ourselves outside the hospital room, in a coffee shop, where Jarrell and Raina strike up a conversation. It turns out that Jarrell, too, is a prospective kidney donor, in his case for a man he calls Uncle Gummy, whom he identifies as a surrogate father and "old friend of my mother from way back." Jarrell named him "Uncle Gummy" because he would bring Gummy Bears as a gift on his visits. As Jarrell says, Uncle Gummy, "Taught me things, about life; paid my way through college." No small gift, since the school in question was Princeton, a pricey member of the Ivy League.

Raina eventually shows Jarrell the list laying out the positive and negative factors she's weighing in deciding whether donate her kidney to Lou. The negatives include: "He had an affair with my best friend's *mom*. . . . Blew off my seventh birthday party. . . . Affair number *two*, with the lady who bought our old moped. . . . Putting our dog to sleep, then saying she ran away. . ." It goes on to cite numerous instances of broken promises, and further incidents of marital infidelity. In fact, we hear of nothing listed in the plus column, only minus after minus.

In the course of their conversation, Jarrell reveals that he is an artist, temporarily living with his mother in Philadelphia because he can't afford to move to New York. But she's going to be out at a meeting that night, so Jarrell invites Raina home to dinner. She accepts, ending the scene.

Time for another parenthesis. In this one, Lou explains his daughter's mental quirks to the audience while Raina chimes in with commentary and amplification. The gist of the passage is that Lou thinks Raina is a waffler who makes "Hamlet look decisive." Raina defends herself by telling the story of the abortion she refused to have—a major decision made with no hesitation. And so we are to understand that she waffles only when considering her father and her kidney.

Lou's physician, Dr. Badu, then shows up to discuss various aspects of organ donation, psychological as well as physical. When she tries to determine whether Raina truly wants to give Lou her kidney, she gets nothing but ambivalent responses. She says that she and Lou are, "like veterans . . . . From different sides of a war who come together . . . later and say, 'Wow, I really tried to kill you, and you tried to kill me. . . . And that's what binds us together.' And I guess that's a little like love."

The original question remaining unresolved, Dr. Badu recommends that Raina take the next steps in the evaluation process: an interview with a social worker, and the collection of an enormous urine sample. Raina agrees, and the movement toward a transplant proceeds.

Lou, in another parenthesis, decides to share with the audience his general views on women. He reflects on the contrast between a mother's unconditional love of her son, and the more equivocal responses he receives from other women as he proceeds through life. Eventually, he says, after years of sexual pursuit, a man marries, and finds himself limited to one woman only. Which doesn't end the appeal to him of others. To which he succumbs. Then along comes a daughter, "And you think, 'Okay, here's my chance: I'll raise a woman . . . so I'll finally know what makes 'em tick. . . .' You don't crack the mystery. . . . And somehow you're still in the dark."

Following the closing of this parenthesis, we experience a change of scene as we move to Jarrell's bedroom in his mother's house, where we find him under the covers with Raina. She protests that this kind of casual encounter is totally out of character for her; that she has been emotionally upended by the confusing events surrounding Lou and the transplant. She confides to him that she has avoided casual hookups because she "always hated the fact that my dad seemed to have this . . . *raging* sexual appetite" which led him to betray her mother constantly. "Mostly just flings, I think, but there was one long-term affair, and it was what it did to my mom. . . . It made her sick."

She notices some of Jarrell's art work hanging in the room, and praises it enthusiastically; he explains how his interests have shifted to design, and how he wants to start a business in New York. Their conversation drifts to childhood memories. Jarrell recalls how Uncle Gummy would often come to his

room and sing to him at bed time. Raina asks him about the song, and Jarrell sings the opening lyrics: “*Oh the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear / And it shows them. . .*” It’s the same “lullaby” Lou sang to Raina! This produces what Aristotle would call a moment of recognition, an explosive discovery that moves a character from ignorance to knowledge about a person of great importance. Since the odds of two different people singing *Mack the Knife* as a lullaby are vanishingly small, it must be the case that Uncle Gummy and Lou are the same person. The honorary Uncle was in fact Marlene’s lover—and she was Lou’s partner in his long-term affair. Jarrell is his son, and he and Raina, it seems, are brother and sister.

This results in another dramatic development that Aristotle would call “a reversal”—a 180-degree turnabout in the situation, changing things to the opposite of what they were before. Thus, Raina and Jarrell are transformed from casual lovers engaged in routine sex into stunned and guilty participants in an incestuous relationship. (See *Oedipus Rex* for the classic ancestor of this moment.) And with this discovery of hidden connections, Act One comes to an end.

Act Two begins with a brief parenthesis in which Raina tries to explain what she regards as the most important bodily fluid that people share, but before she can make her point the phone rings, and she is drawn into a conversation with Lily, who is missing her mother.

The parenthesis closes, and we enter a long scene between Lou and Raina in which she expresses her shock and confusion over the newly-revealed facts about Jarrett. Lou counters by telling her that he wasn’t the only unfaithful partner in the marriage: “Your mom played the field mor’n me,” especially with a guy named Dick Tyson. He also defends his affair with Marlene as something “bigger” than just a routine liaison, recalling how they met at an AA meeting, and how she told the story of her brutal stepfather and her troubled life. Beginning in this kind of honesty, their relationship, though secret—hidden even from Jarrett—nonetheless lasted for years, and developed into something like love.

The rest of the act is mostly spent sorting out the consequences of the revelations of Act One. Raina, for example, now recoils from the idea of donating her kidney to a man who engaged in a lifelong deception about his second “family.” Instead, she visits an online site that provides profiles of people who need kidney transplants. There she finds many candidates far more worthy than her neglectful, dishonest, and unfaithful father. One in particular catches her eye, a “sanitation worker from Lubbock, Texas, with three kids. . . .”

There is also a flashback in which Lou visits Marlene to seek her permission to ask Jarrell to be his kidney donor. Initially refusing, she finally consents, on condition that no money change hands because Jarrell’s “got ancestors who were sold; that ain’t gonna happen again.”

Jarrell berates Lou for keeping his paternal identity a secret: I never had a father—at least, never knew I had one. And now I find out he was there all along, just too much of a coward to take responsibility. . . . *My family doubled in size today; my entire childhood's built on lies; and turns out I've got a—sorry, could've had a dad. But he had another kid to ignore, so I had to settle for Gummy Bears.*” Not to be derailed in his quest for a kidney, Lou tries a combination of flattery and financial inducements to lure Jarrell into continuing as a potential donor. He praises his artistic talent, perhaps an inheritance from his father. And, we eventually learn, he offers to subsidize his move to New York.

Meanwhile, Raina pays a visit to Marlene, principally to demonstrate Lou's flaws by revealing how he treated his dying ex-wife. She shows Marlene two pictures of her mother: one taken during her youth, and one on her deathbed. She wants to drive home to Marlene the fact that Lou never visited his wife while she was dying. In the face of this callous behavior, Raina decided to leave Philadelphia, adopt her mother's maiden name, and start a new life in Ohio. And that was the last she saw of her father until he showed up a year later asking for her kidney. But Marlene persuades Raina to relent in her anger, and try to forgive Lou. And so, she changes her mind about donating her kidney to her father.

She visits Lou in the hospital, decides to tear up her list of pluses and minuses, and affirms to him that blood, “really is thicker than water. . . . We are connected, parents and children. I'm your daughter. And you're my dad. . . . I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. So I want you to have my kidney.”

Immediately following this declaration, Jarrell arrives, equally determined to give his kidney to Lou. There ensues a kind of bidding war between him and Raina in which each claims priority as a donor. Finally, Lou decides on Raina, a choice made before the final medical evaluation of their eligibility to donate is available, so both, neither, or only one might be suitable, and that one might not be Raina. At this point Dr. Badu arrives with the lab reports. Jarrell, it turns out, is not a match. Raina's situation is more complicated: she is a match, but she is not in fact Lou's biological daughter.

So Lou's earlier description of his wife's infidelities was true. And so we are presented with another moment of recognition and reversal—not to mention the ironic twist that results in the biological son being no match, while the biologically unrelated non-daughter is the perfect donor. Contrary to what Raina affirmed earlier, then, blood is *not* always thicker than water.

The play ends with a final audience-directed parenthesis, a post-operative scene in which Raina explains a moral epiphany she has experienced thanks to a little coaching from a biologist friend: “genetically speaking, we're siblings—or at the very least, cousins. In other words, under the skin . . . we're family. . . . And *if that's true*. . . . How can I say, ‘This is mine, and not yours’”? The house lights rise in the theater, the cast looks out at the now-illuminated audience, Raina tears up her list of Lou's faults, and she and Lou raise their shirts, revealing their surgical scars. Then Jarrell displays a scar of his own. Why has he

had surgery, since he was rejected as a donor for his father? The answer: “Lubbock, Texas.” In other words he has given his kidney to the deserving stranger discovered by Raina.

Periodically throughout the play, a bell on Raina’s phone has chimed to remind her, we learn, to be “mindful,” which means to be fully aware of all the physical and emotional implications of a given moment. That bell now rings, and, “Hearing it, all four actors shut their eyes, inhale deeply, and then exhale together.” They are breathing together—conspiring— to be mindful. With that, the lights fade, ending the play.

### THE CHARACTERS.

**Raina** tells Lou that what she wants most deeply is to “feel connected” to him, which for her means making him “feel bad about how you hurt your wife, and by extension, your daughter. I want you to remember your granddaughter’s *name*.” So “connection” really seems to involve something like getting Lou to recognize her as his victim: if and when he admits that he has done these hurtful things to her, she will finally feel some kind of moral affirmation. She wants his repentance.

In the meantime, she has to decide whether to give him her kidney. The more alienated she feels from him, the less likely she is to consent to a transplant. The long list of his paternal failures seems to offer little hope of overcoming the distance between them, and donating a kidney is, as she says, “an intimate act. . . To share your flesh with somebody else. It’s not a thing a person does lightly.”

And yet, she can’t escape the fact that she is his daughter. As she declares, “blood is thicker than water,” by which she means the biological connection between them cannot be severed. So despite his flaws—and his failure to confess and do penance—nature itself requires her to come to his rescue. And it is a matter of life and death. Can she possibly choose, in effect, to kill her father? Does she want to be a character in a Greek tragedy, like Orestes, who kills his wicked mother?

So perhaps her desperation to connect is what drives her to embrace the idea of a primal, indissoluble link between her and Lou. A parental link which, as it turns out, doesn’t actually exist. Instead, there is another kind of bond, which, like paternity, is also biological: her compatibility with him as donor. In a sense this transfers her relationship with him from the nuclear biological family to the universal family of man, with its shared genetics. The web of connection has become limitless.

**Lou’s** objective is as basic as they come: “*I don’t want to die, Raina. Not now.*” The means to achieving that goal is to find a kidney that will save his life. And Lou will do whatever it takes to track down the saving organ.

He has made attempts to acquire a kidney through outright purchase, through a fraudulent marriage, and through a cash-free financial arrangement with Jarrell. But he is thwarted at every turn: American

law prohibits purchase; his doctor would see through the fraudulent marriage scheme; and Jarrell is morally opposed to bartering for his organs.

So why doesn't he satisfy Raina's desire for him acknowledge his paternal sins and display the appropriate degree of contrition? Because that kind of confession and repentance are not in his line. Instead, he has been raised to be tough and emotionally undemonstrative, like his father. Lou tells the story of the time his father, who constantly belittled his woodworking skills, criticized what was in fact a flawless job "in front of the whole damn crew." That was the breaking point for Lou: "and I say, '... I quit.'" Instead of his father's exploding in fury, the old man "wells up—tears in his eyes. . . . I think the old bastard was actually proud of me. Couldn't ever say it, couldn't ever show it, but I guess he was."

Maybe blood actually is thicker than water, and maybe another old adage, "Like father, like son," helps explain Lou's character. His father loved him, but couldn't show it.

We see something like this pattern in Lou's relationship with Raina. For example, several times in the course of the play he refers to her daughter as Lila rather than Lily, which is her real name. Each time Raina interprets this mistake as evidence of Lou's lack of connection with his family in general, and with her in particular. And each time, Lou responds by saying, "I was just yankin' your chain." Which is to say, "Of course I know the kid's name." In other words, misnaming his grandchild is actually an intentional provocation, a verbal gesture designed to elicit a response from Raina. And as Lou says during one of these exchanges, "Maybe . . . if you can yank someone's chain, it means you are connected."

So his emotional tactics, like his father's, are deeply paradoxical. When his father was most proud of his son, he said nothing. Otherwise he was always yanking Lou's chain. Likewise, when Raina reaches out to Lou, he yanks her chain, thereby reminding her that he's always going to needle her before he gives her what she wants.

**Jarrell's** life isn't at risk, and he's not suffering from a searing sense of alienation from a parent, so his character is starkly different from Lou or Raina. When we first meet him, he seems good-humored and emotionally stable. Unlike Raina, who is beset by conflicting emotions about donating a kidney to Lou, Jarrell is generously committed to helping his cherished Uncle Gummy.

Beyond this, he plans on moving to New York to take up a serious career in design—a personal objective he must defer for financial reasons, a postponement that causes him no discernable anguish.

It is only when he discovers Uncle Gummy's real identity that his well-ordered inner world is shaken. "I never had a father," he tells Lou, "at least, never knew I had one. And now I find out he was there all along, just too much of a coward to take responsibility." Is Jarrell suggesting that it's better to be

without a father than to acquire one who is a coward? He exhibits an artistic talent he has obviously inherited from Lou. Are his father's moral failings also part of his legacy?

Jarrell is also upset with Marlene for hiding the truth from him: "Why did you lie to me?" he asks. "What, you thought I couldn't handle the truth?" Before these world-upending discoveries, Jarrell had one staunchly moral parent who was a model of good sense, and a kindly "uncle" who showered him with gifts and affection. Now he has a liar for a mother and a coward for a father.

Despite these seismic revelations, Jarrell manages to regain his generosity toward Lou. Rather than withdraw his offer of a kidney, he becomes even more determined to be a donor than he was at the beginning of the play, engaging in a bout of fierce sibling rivalry with Raina over which of them will provide the needed organ. And by the play's end, he has gone so far as to give his kidney to someone in Texas. Having discovered that both his mother and father were in some sense unknown to him, he has seemingly decided that any stranger can count as a member of his family.

**Marlene** plays a crucial role in changing Raina's mind about donating a kidney to Lou. Having discovered that Lou is Jarrell's father, and that Marlene was the "other woman" responsible for so much of her mother's anguish, Raina decides to pay her a visit. But rather than cementing Raina's anger at Lou, the encounter with Marlene softens her attitude.

As we know, Marlene had a sexually abusive step-father, and a childhood and youth marked by "abortions, addictions, juvenile—You name it. . . . A catastrophe of a life." When Raina asks if she ever forgave her stepfather, Marlene's answer is blunt and unexpected: "Well, considering I stabbed him in the chest, I guess the answer would have to be no." But, she notes, when she got out of prison, "he apologized. Which seemed like a step in the right direction." So even in the thick of catastrophe, Marlene was able to see at least a hint of hope. And instead of continuing a life of abortion and criminal behavior, she has created a stable home that produced Jarrell, the Princeton graduate who will become a New York designer.

So Marlene has learned something about healing— knowledge she applies to the confused and hurting Raina. During the visit, Raina "breaks down" as she recounts the many ways that Lou failed her as a father. "MARLENE watches her cry for a few moments, then reaches out to her. . . . Hey . . . C'mere, baby . . . . It's a hard thing to lose your mama. And to be a mama. It's all hard."

And so, because of Marlene, Raina changes her decision about Lou and her kidney. In Marlene, Raina discovers someone who can remain hopeful despite the damage done her by a terrible step-father. And she also finds a kind of second mother.

"It was your mom who convinced me," she tells Jarrell. "Not that she was trying to; it was just her way of being."

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.**

1. Do you think Lou's behavior justifies Raina's decision to withhold her kidney from him?
2. Do you think Lou should have told Raina about Jarrell?
3. Do you think Marlene should have told Jarrell the truth about "Uncle Gummy?"
4. Do you think it should be legal to buy organs for transplant in the U.S.? Is it legal elsewhere?
5. Why does Jarrell decide to donate a kidney to a complete stranger from Texas?
6. Why is the play called *Under the Skin*?
7. Jarrell and Raina begin as total strangers, then discover that they are half-brother-and-sister; then learn that there is in fact no genetic connection between them. How would you describe their relationship by the end of the play?