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# *I and You*

By Lauren Gunderson

Produced by The Public Theatre

January 2020

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## AN AUDIENCE GUIDE

By Martin Andrucki

Charles A. Dana Professor of Theater  
Bates College

**PLEASE, NO SPOILERS!** If you're a teacher discussing this play with your students before attending a performance, please don't reveal the ending of *I And You*. Let them be astonished.

### THE AUTHORS.

**LAUREN GUNDERSON** has written the following about herself online:

Lauren M. Gunderson is the most produced living playwright in America of 2016, the winner of the Lanford Wilson Award and the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award, a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and John Gassner Award for Playwriting, and a recipient of the Mellon Foundation's 3-Year Residency with Marin Theatre Company. She studied Southern Literature and Drama at Emory University, and Dramatic Writing at NYU's Tisch School where she was a Reynolds Fellow in Social Entrepreneurship. Her work has been commissioned, produced and developed at companies across the US including South Coast Rep (*Emilie, Silent Sky*), The Kennedy Center (*The Amazing Adventures of Dr. Wonderful And Her Dog!*), The O'Neill, The Denver Center, San Francisco Playhouse, Marin Theatre, Synchronicity, Olney Theatre, Berkeley Rep, Shotgun Players, Theatre Works, Crowded Fire and more. She co-authored *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley* with Margot Melcon. Her work is published at Playscripts (*I and You, Exit Pursued By A Bear, The Taming, and Toil and Trouble*), Dramatists (*Silent Sky, Bauer, Miss Bennet*), and Samuel French (*Emilie*).

**WALT WHITMAN** (1819-1892), the great American poet, is the virtual co-author of this play. Its two characters, Caroline and Anthony, high-school students, spend almost all their time on stage working on

a report they must present on Whitman's poem, "Song of Myself" which appeared in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Their joint study of Whitman leads them from an initial wariness of each other to a shared sense of awe at Whitman's work, which in turn brings them to a profound sense of mutual discovery—even to the kind of love the Greeks called "agape," the non-erotic bonding of passionate friendship.

Given the differences between these two characters, achieving this level of spiritual and emotional connection is a kind of miracle.

Despite being classmates, they barely know each other as the play begins. Caroline has been seriously ill for much of her life, and so rarely goes to school. Instead she spends most of her time in her room, learning to live with her dreams, her fears, and her solitude.

Anthony is the kid we all wish we were in high school: good-looking, socially and academically successful, a varsity athlete. As the playwright says, "He's an 'A' student, a team player, a nice guy."

Their family lives are also sharply different. Anthony's father, a professor, spends lots of time with his son—going to movies, cracking lame jokes, just being there. Caroline's father, on the other hand, has recently dropped out of his marriage, leaving his wife to manage a large house with a very sick child at its emotional center.

To sharpen the differences between them even further, the author says it is essential that they "not be the *same* race." In the published script, Caroline is described as "White;" Anthony as "African-American."

The bridge between them is "Song of Myself." How does this poem bring them together?

Its first lines virtually tell it all:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Far from being an enormous act of egotism, the poem celebrates the dissolution of the ego. Whitman wants us to see that he is not only himself, but also you, the reader. And, of course, the opposite is also true—all of us are ultimately members of a vast, cosmic unity, something like the Christian idea of the communion of saints. And it's not only human beings who are inextricably implicit in one another; we are all children of the material world, offspring of the stars and the earth:

I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass,  
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air. . . (5-6)  
.....  
Through me many long dumb voices . . .  
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,  
And of the threads that connect the stars. . . (508-512)

The title of the play, we remind ourselves, is *I And You*. From the perspective of Whitman's poem, the two pronouns are essentially the same.

The editors of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (First Edition) can help us understand the social, moral, and spiritual ambitions that underlie "Song of Myself."

Whitman declared that the American poet would not repudiate past beliefs but would incorporate them into newer ones, just as Americans are composed of all peoples. . . The poet would incarnate the American geography, occupations, and the people themselves in a new and transcendent poetic form. The great poet would find encouragement and support in the sciences and in branches of history. . . This poet would have a sense of ultimate causality—that cruelty and goodness perpetuate themselves, that "no result exists now without being from its long antecedent result." By his capacity for encouraging and exalting others, the poet would soon replace the priest as servant to the people (1852-53).

So, Whitman's poem is a vast symphony whose theme is the national motto, *e pluribus unum*. It celebrates America's people, its history, and its geography—viewing all of these in the light of science and offering this ecstatic vision to the reader as a priestly work of healing and encouragement.

Which is exactly what the poem provides for Caroline and Anthony in *I And You*. At the end of the play, we learn that she has been suffering from a diseased liver, that Anthony has died on the basketball court, and that his liver has been transplanted into Caroline's body. As the author tells us in her postscript below, "the events of *I And You* are a kind of dream that Caroline experiences while in surgery. I like to think of it as a dream that she and Anthony are sharing." The adhesive holding the dreamers together is Whitman's poem.

Walt Whitman was born on Long Island, New York in 1819. He spent much of his life in and around Brooklyn and Manhattan. He worked as a farmer, teacher, journalist, politician, and government official. In 1855 he published *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poems one-third longer than *The Iliad*. Over the next 35 years, he continuously revised and expanded this work, releasing its final edition in 1892, the year of his death. Whitman lived during one of the most turbulent periods in American history. He participated in the political battles over the expansion of slavery in the 1840s and 50s; he served in a military hospital during the Civil War; he observed the rancorous conflicts of Reconstruction, and he saw America enter its gilded age at the end of the nineteenth century.

#### **PLOT, CHARACTERS, AND THEMES: THE PLAYWRIGHT'S POSTSCRIPT**

*Playwright Lauren Gunderson provides the following postscript to the play.*

#### **After The End: A Few Truths**

*I And You* is a play that, I hope, tells a few stories at once. I intended to wrap our characters' truths around other truths, revealing their complementarity gradually like a musical canon. Some of these will not (and need not) be garnered from watching the play once, but I wanted to offer them up for post-show discussion. Thank you for coming on the journey.

**The simplest story is the most true.**

The simplest version of this *story* is that these two characters need each other. As classmates thrust together for a class project on Whitman, they need each other. As young adults articulating themselves anew, they need each other. As confidants revealing their desires and dreams, they need each other. As curious hearts open to a new kind of young love, they need each other.

And then finally and most profoundly, as two bodies now becoming one, they need each other to live fully, to live in gratitude for each day, to stand with this mystery that is human connection, they need each other.

**The entire play takes place while Caroline is under anesthesia during her transplant operation.**

In the realist reality of Caroline's life, the events of *I And You* are a kind of dream that she experiences while in surgery. I like to think of it as a dream that she and Anthony are sharing.

This does not mean that the play is a lie, that Anthony isn't really present, or that their encounter is not real. It is very real, and he is very real. It is the most real thing she has ever experienced, and Anthony has changed her life forever.

**Caroline's room is a metaphor for her body.**

After several drafts I realized that the room which cradles our story is a metaphor for the body that, in the play's final reveal, Anthony and Caroline are fated to share. If that is true, then Anthony's first entrance is the biological "entrance" of his flesh to hers in the operating room. When she distrusts and rejects him in the first scene, it is a metaphor for her body initially rejecting his organ. When he starts to give up on her and wants to leave her room later in the play, it is his liver resisting her body's biology. When they hold hands, kiss, and embrace at the end of the play and the walls are taken away from them, the metaphor would encourage us to see it as the anatomical harmony of a successful transplant. And as Anthony, quoting Whitman, says in his last words to her: "I shall be good health to you nevertheless, and filter and fiber your blood," which is exactly what a liver does.

**The Future.**

I imagine Caroline growing up healthy, and hungry for life, always feeling like she knows someone very important but not remembering whom. She misses someone she doesn't remember, like a grandparent she never got to meet. Throughout her life she will experience a kind of *déjà vu* when she hears Coltrane or reads Whitman. She will have a strange urge to visit New York City's Blue Note Jazz Club, she will linger over her turtle, she will laugh at Pop-Tarts. Perhaps there is even a photo on her cell phone that she doesn't remember taking of a boy she can't quite place.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever become friends with someone because of a shared love of something: a poem, song, movie, novel, or other work of art? A sports team? An academic subject like math or science?
2. If so, why do you think that happened?
3. In “Song of Myself” Whitman writes about discovering yourself in others and others in yourself. Have you ever experienced this?
4. Have you ever become friends with someone radically different from yourself?
5. If so, did you learn anything from that experience? What?
6. Have you had a friend or known someone who has been sick for a long period of time? How has that affected your relationship with that person? How has that affected his or her personality?
7. Have you ever read or studied any poetry by Walt Whitman? Ever heard of him? Do you bring any preconceptions about him to the play?
8. Has a poem, song, story, movie ever helped you to understand things more clearly? Yourself? The world outside yourself?
9. In the play, Anthony and Caroline define themselves by the music they love. Do you or your friends do this? Why?
10. What are some of the qualities you look for in possible friends?