



A COMPANION GUIDE TO PLAY AND PRODUCTION

BY LUCAS H. REILLY



Novel first printed August 17, 1945

This adaptation First Staged at The Showtimers Studio Theatre
in Roanoke, Virginia on September 29, 1961.

A New Staging by Jessica Robblee

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The Play in 100 Words

Manor Farm is overthrown by the animals once farmed there. Humans gone and Animals in control, the residents strive to create a better system called Animalism. They vow to never become like Humans, but while striving for this lofty pursuit, their interests conflict and their goal to build an equal, free, and happy world for themselves is perverted.



Horses and Sheep, from the Cheltenham Trust

Definitions

Socialism: a theory or system of social organization that advocates the ownership and control of the means of production and distribution, capital, land, etc., by the community as a whole, usually through a centralized government.

Totalitarianism: absolute control by the state or a governing branch of a highly centralized power.

Communism: a theory or system of social organization based on the holding of all property in common, actual ownership being ascribed to the community as a whole or to the state.

OR

a system of social organization in which all economic and social activity is controlled by a totalitarian state dominated by a single and self-perpetuating political party.

Capitalism: an economic system in which investment in and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange of wealth is made and maintained chiefly by private individuals or corporations, especially as contrasted to cooperatively or state-owned means of wealth.

Democratic Socialism: a modified form of socialism, achieved by a gradual transition by and under democratic political processes.

Neoliberalism: a political approach that favors free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending.

Animalism: the system of social organization and power created by the animals on Animal/Manor Farm.

Confirmation Bias: bias that results from the tendency to process and analyze information in such a way that it supports one's preexisting ideas and convictions

Propaganda: information, ideas, or rumors deliberately spread widely to help or harm a person, group, movement, institution, nation, etc.

Raj: The harsh imperial rule of England over India between 1858 and 1947.

George Orwell in Some of his Own Words

Born Eric Blair just after the turn of the century, the man who was to become best known as George Orwell began his life in India under British Raj where his father was stationed. Growing up in England, being raised by his mother with help of his older sister Marjorie, Blair was a somewhat isolated child whose imagination expressed itself in the literary form from an early age.

"I had the lonely child's habit of making up stories and holding conversations with imaginary persons, and I think from the very start my literary ambitions were mixed up with the feeling of being isolated and undervalued." - From "Why I Write"

A boy who would become a man of keen analysis and sharp, sometimes divisive opinions, Orwell noted the division of the classes as early as his boarding school days. While on a partial scholarship, he noticed the favorable treatment of the richer boys whose families did more to support the school financially. Though he excelled in school, he was forced to work, unable to afford a University education. However, after a short stint in India, he returned to England to jumpstart his writing career. Known for his razor-sharp perspective, Orwell wrote on issues as truly English as the ideal pub to the high theory and ideology of complex subjects like Utopia.

The Puritanical nonsense of excluding children and therefore to some extent women from pubs has turned these places into mere boozing shops instead of the family gathering places that they ought to be.
- From his recurring segment in *The Tribune* "As I Please" (1943–1945)

Orwell's politics were somewhat complicated; a passionate belief in Democratic Socialist principles as well as a great patriotism for England. He was also a man who was willing to risk everything for the ideas represented in his writing. In 1936 he and his wife uprooted themselves and went to Spain to fight against the overthrow of the Democratic Republican government of Spain. He was shot in the throat and wounded badly.

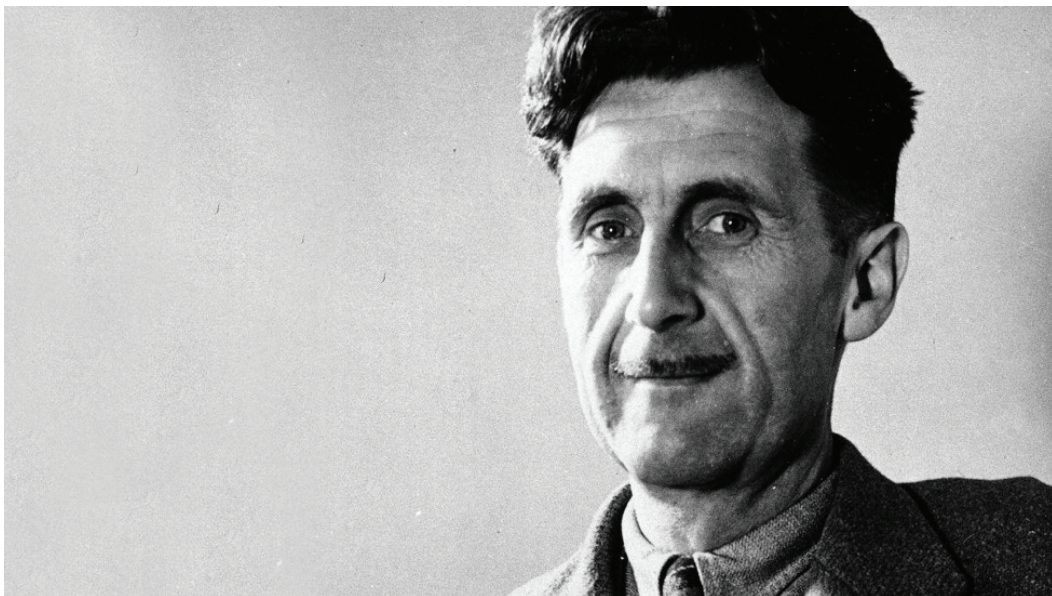
All the war-propaganda, all the screaming and lies and hatred, comes invariably from people who are not fighting. -From his diary, January 1942

After escaping treason charges and returning to England with injuries and tuberculosis as souvenirs, Orwell's health would never fully recover, and as World War II gripped the world he found himself torn between his country and his ideals. He was working for the BBC creating programming to be listened to in India to combat that of Nazi Germany. However, after a few years he abandoned his post to pursue literary work in leftist publications, which he thought to be more necessary work--especially as his work for the BBC received a meager listenership among its intended audience.

Political language... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.
- From *Politics and the English Language* (1946)

This was when he began working in earnest on what would become *Animal Farm*. As his health deteriorated further and the symptoms of tuberculosis flared up again, he spent his final years creating both *Animal Farm* and his other most well-known novel, *1984*. He passed away in 1950 aged only 46 years.

"A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats.
- From his recurring segment in *The Tribune* "As I Please" (1943-1945)





An interview with Director Jessica Robblee

As an actor in the Arvada Center Black Box Repertory company, Jessica has appeared in *Sylvia*, *The Moors*, *Sin Street Social Club*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *The Drowning Girls*. This year she takes her spot in the director's chair to tackle talking animals, class struggle, and staging an adaptation that challenges us to reconsider our own politics. The following interview is a firsthand look into the vision of the director for this play, production, and how it fits into today's world.

When did you first read *Animal Farm*?

I never read *Animal Farm* in school (no idea how I managed that, but it's true). I came to the book as an adult. His spare and lovely writing – the way his fine allegory gives you fresh eyes – made me *pay attention*. It scared me. It broke my heart. It told me how the world isn't what we want to believe it is. It told me we need to witness the bad to find the good.

This story showcases some universal truths about how humankind's intentions, even when good, can be warped for the worst. Focusing on some positives, what do you love about *Animal Farm*?

It engenders sympathy in us for all of the farm animals from the start. I guiltily noticed the power of this unique brand of sympathy we give to animals but don't always muster up for our fellow humans. But you said positive! Orwell's writing is lovely and his sense of humor is on point. He gifts us with some truly funny characters and moments.

What do you think of the political impact of the play in our culture today?

People of all political stripes tell me a production of *Animal Farm* is "so timely," and it leaves me thinking that the tricky part of how we latch onto this book is that we often see it supporting our previously held points of view. We hold it up righteously at the pigs and Joneses we see in our lives. I think Orwell is asking for more than that. I think he wants us to think about when we're pigs and Joneses – when we're sheep – or hens, or donkeys, any of the animals – and more than all that, I think he wants us to think – what else we could be? Because this isn't working.

That being said, a great deal has changed since the 1940s. How do you think this story might be different if Orwell had seen what we are seeing?

People have conjectured over what Orwell would think of so many things. It is a very fun game. Let's see... Perhaps he could continue the story to include:

- Animals coming forward to share they do not care to fit the expected definition of their species.
- Animals tearing down the windmill to get someone to listen to them.
- The wide publication of Squealer's propaganda and occasionally teams of raccoons on bicycles would block the dissemination of Squealer's words with K-pop-fan panache.
- These dire circumstances pressing the animals to notice and employ the best systems from all over the county to make it possible for all animals to be free and equal.

But that last one doesn't sound too Orwell to me. Even though that's what he was aiming for.

The Black Box Rep seems to have a bit of a penchant for actors playing animals. *The Moors*, most recently yourself in *Sylvia*, and now *Animal Farm*. What is it about personified animals that connects us to our humanity? Why is it so entertaining?

Animals, in art and in life, help us see things in new ways. And, man oh man, do we need that—the honesty of animals, the different lens through which they see the world. It gives us a distance we need, I think. As an actor, it gives you great new pathways to move and communicate differently, to consider your priorities differently. It's freeing for the actor and the audience to really just go for it, to pretend. To believe and pretend often helps me to see.

With which animal in the story do you most closely associate?

I have some Boxer in me...The Robblee family believes in working hard, that's for sure. But I must confess that I am the one in my family who tends toward questioning it all quite frequently, so that also lands me in an observing, wondering, parsing place like Clover. She observes closely, she loves deeply, she cares very much that she doesn't hurt a little duckling in the straw, and she does not read as much as she should. I definitely aspire to have more Snowball and Hen coursing through my veins.

The full title of this book, and of this adaptation is *Animal Farm: A Faerie [Fairy] Story*. What should adults learn from fairy tales?

We need to learn scary lessons and fairy stories help us want to do that. They help us attend, and by attend, I mean *listen so new stuff actually gets in there*. It is hard to learn when we need to sleep and eat and work so we can buy the next thing we'll eat. Orwell designed *Animal Farm* to be accessible to many, to take his ideas to many people and countries, to shock us by welcoming us into a familiar, pastoral system, one with inhabitants we are rather wired to care for because they're cute and "*poor things, aren't they subordinate and helpless*" and then root for them as they rise up!

Characters narrate some of their own actions in this telling of the story. This isn't how characters speak in the original text. Why do you think the adaptor chose this method to translate the story from literature to live theatre?

This style of staging classic literature has been out there a while in the realm of stage adaptations. I'm sure it has been used in many places, but I first learned of it through a friend who worked with a Seattle company that called it Book-It Style. Theatrically speaking, when you narrate an action, you cannot take that action for granted. It shakes up how we hear/see stories, creating a distance from which something can be seen anew, and early in his career, Orwell went through a spell of narrating the action he witnessed around him.

George Orwell was an outspoken Democratic Socialist. What do you think he aimed to say about socialism in particular with this story?

He believed Russia's system was calling itself Socialism when in fact it had morphed into a monstrous totalitarian regime. He puts forward what Socialism is meant to be – better lives for all beings, free of classism – and how power-grabs destroy that. He believed Russians aimed for Socialism and missed, and he wanted people to see that so that they could start over, aiming for true Socialism.

What of our contemporary American social philosophy do you see in Animalism and the changes it undergoes?

Animalism's changes feel like a webpage you check one day for some information and then the next day you return to the webpage only to find no trace of the information you read. You have no proof that the information you read ever existed. That is so unsettling. It steals your bearings from you, it steals your knowledge, it makes you feel like your knowledge doesn't matter.

Yes, it often feels like the world moves so fast that I can't keep up. How might this story help us cope with this new reality?

I think good changes in our social philosophy are happening because of people trying – like Orwell – to interrupt the status quo. But we're making missteps, talking over people, changing rules so frequently people don't know how to keep up, policing each other fiercely, typing more than we talk, and most of us don't want to give up our beds for others who don't have them. How do we get to a place less divisive where we can trust that a rising tide of openness will lift all boats? No matter what side of the aisle you're on, Orwell would likely tell you a lot of uncomfortable things, so if some of what audiences experience challenges them, maybe that's a good sign.



The Pretty Pigs, from Staffordshire Heritage & Archives.



An Interview with Actor Abner Genece

Abner has acted on many a Colorado stage, most recently at Curious Theatre in *American Son* where he acted alongside director of *Stick Fly*, Jada Suzanne Dixon. You'll also recognize him from a few seasons ago when he graced the Black Box in *Sin Street Social Club* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Abner is one of Colorado theatre's strongest and most inviting voices, and he returns

to the Rep this season as Old Major, Benjamin, and others in *Animal Farm* as well as Joe later on this season in *Stick Fly*. I had the privilege to ask Abner a few questions about his perspective on the play and his approach to his work.

When did you first read *Animal Farm*? What did you think of it then?

I first read *Animal Farm* in high school. I remember feeling that this was a story infused with messages; I particularly noticed its similarities with the Civil Rights Movement.

How might *Animal Farm* inform some of our contemporary struggles for Racial Equality, Gender Equality, Economic Equality?

I am struck by just how relevant *Animal Farm* is in 2022. It explores so much more than I thought it did back in high school. How can one experience *Animal Farm* and not think of the current world around us, including struggles with the pandemic, discrimination and violence, climate change, poverty, and more?

As you are getting into the swing of rehearsing and later performing in Rep, what are the biggest challenges to working in this manner?

Honestly, the biggest challenge has been to stay safe and remain diligent in the wake of the pandemic. Adding these responsibilities to an already full schedule has been eye-opening.

I know the subscribers appreciate your work and navigation of these strange times wholeheartedly. Theatre is hard work, but it's got to be a blast as well. What is the biggest challenge in portraying an animal-character in a play?

The biggest challenge has been striking the ideal balance between a human characterization and an animalistic one. Director Jessica Robblee (who portrayed a dog this season in *Sylvia*) has expertly guided me and the cast through this process.

What are the biggest benefits of working in a repertory company?

The depth and richness of the work, as a result of sustained collaboration with the cast, production team, designers, and artisans, is the biggest benefit (and most unique aspect) of storytelling with this company.

How does your approach to your acting process in a play like *Animal Farm* differ (if at all) from your approach to a play like *Stick Fly*?

In *Animal Farm*, I'm aware that I'm telling a "story within a story"; in *Stick Fly*, I'm keenly focused on the story itself.

The full title of this piece is *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*.

Why do you think Orwell chose to frame the story this way?

I feel that the title has a tongue-in-cheek quality. This is a very sober, mature play disguised as a "children's story."

What of our contemporary American social philosophy do you see in *Animalism* and the changes it undergoes over the course of the play?

For me it shows how any good idea, no matter how pure and genuine, can become corrupted. I think of how much evil has been forced on the world in the name of very worthy notions, such as religion, justice, progress, and more.

Animal Farm: The Danger and Power of Allegory

Though this story was wielded by Westerners in its time as an anti-Soviet, anti-socialist piece, George Orwell was himself a staunch Democratic-Socialist. He served as the literary editor for a socialist magazine, *The Tribune*, having left a job writing what he deemed propaganda that was being broadcast in India for the BBC.

"Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly against totalitarianism and for Democratic Socialism as I understand it."

Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* in part to satirize the failure of the Soviet experiment in order to help a culture at a different stage of the revolutionary cycle to actualize a better system, which in Orwell's opinion would be built upon Democratic Socialist principles. He did detest the admiration some English and American socialists at the time had for the Soviets, and with this story he put them in a rather uncomfortable position. By revealing the failures of the principles championed by the revolutionaries of Animalism, Orwell puts his rivals in a rather compromised spot. He tells us that even one's own lofty ideals, when corrupted and twisted to further inequality between groups, can be used to oppress others and defeat the purpose those ideals originally set out to serve.

"Every generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it."

Since its inception, the groups of folks claiming *Animal Farm* for their own intellectual camp have ranged from the most vehement anti-capitalists to the most virulent ethno-nationalists. Groups have often raised this piece up at their perceived and real oppressors, its allegorical style lending itself to the purposes of anyone with an agenda to upend a system that they see as unfair. In the "Further Reading" section of this guide, the reader will find an article arguing that white Neoliberal progressives believe in the same kind of equality eventually played out in *Animal Farm*, alongside an article postulating that the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) is an analog for the equality achieved on Manor Farm. Allegory is powerful because everyone can see their lives and perspectives reflected. However, it doesn't seem that we all see the same thing looking back at us.



Asher Brown Durand. *Pastoral Landscape*, oil on canvas 1861

"The words democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another."

As you enjoy the play, consider the stages of the revolutionary cycle and the nature of confirmation bias. As you follow and feel along with the animals, consider how it might reflect Soviet Socialism, Third Reich Fascism, and the revolutions that continue to be waged and staged across the globe today. How can we be sure that our purest ideals don't turn into the worst of those that we abhor?

Thematic Overview of *Animal Farm*

One of Orwell's contemporaries wrote to him in the year *Animal Farm* was penned that "allegory inherently means more than the author means." This fact has uplifted as well as plagued this piece and its author's original intentions from the outset. Though the nature of allegory means the applications of the following themes can be discussed amidst a multitude of subjects political, dramatic, and psychological, allegory also lends itself to a universality that is inescapable. Below are just a few of the themes present in this play. How do these universal themes inform the analysis of the political and social issues explored in this play, production, and guide? Is it possible to see this story as just a group of animals living on a farm or is it necessarily something more?

The Exploitation of Power

From Jones's abusive treatment of the animals at the beginning stasis of the story to the upheaval toppling Manor Farm, all the way through the many transformations of Animalism, this play is about how creatures exploit one another for power, and how ending up in a different position in the power structure of society affects one's mindset, well-being, and hard realities. When does power shift in the play? Does power inherently taint even the most well-intentioned animal?

The Distribution of Labor and the Means of Production

The well-being of the Animals on the farm is connected directly to their ability to run the farm in an efficient and productive manner. As the power and structure of the farm's social strata change, the production of the farm is continually monitored, sometimes for the good and sometimes for the bad. This production contributes directly to the well-being of those on the farm; when the farm is more productive, there is more food. How does this fact impact the choices of the animals in the play and the trajectory of Animalism? Is the greatest productivity always in line with the greatest happiness among the animals?

The Distribution of Goods, Wealth, and Comfort

The well-being of the animals on the farm is also connected directly to the distribution of the goods, wealth, and comfort provided by their work and ownership of the farm. Across the story, who gets what and how much is always in flux. What are the major shifts in the distribution of wealth in the play and how does that directly affect the animals' well-being? When productivity is highest, does that always benefit everyone on the farm?



Alstone Bridge by Thomas Hulley, The Cheltenham Trust

Camaraderie in Shared Circumstances

Throughout the undeniable changes undergone at Manor and later Animal Farm, the animals find consistent comfort in the fact that they are in the struggle or the triumph together. Even animals that are extremely different are able to find common ground as animals on the same farm. Even as conditions worsen, this sense of camaraderie gives the animals hope, but also blinds them to how things have changed for the worse. Is it better to suffer together? Is suffering along with a group safer and more tolerable than daring to try to change something alone, against the will of the group?

The Unchangeable Nature of Living Things

From the upheaval and the fire of revolution through to the hard scraping ice of hard work, many of the animals on the farm are essential; they maintain their basic essence and character throughout the play. Are people like this? Are there parts of ourselves that do not change? Can this idea be extrapolated to include groups of people, or humankind as a whole?

Prompts for Further Discussion

1. With which Animal in the story do you most closely associate?
2. Which of our contemporary social issues do you think is most pointedly commented on by this story?
3. If you've read the novel, how does this adaptation and staging of the story differ from reading the story?
4. Why do characters sometimes narrate their own actions in this adaptation? How does this approach to staging enhance or detract from the theatrical event?
5. What parts of Animalism do you agree with?
6. What parts of Animalism do you disagree with?
7. What is the biggest mistake the animals make as Animal Farm falls back into the old ways of Manor Farm? Is there anything they could have done to avoid their decline back into a similar structure of power?
8. Is it possible to achieve utopia?
9. Are all those who hope for revolution or at least building a better system doomed to the same fate as the animals at Manor Farm?
10. What can we do to bridge the gap between our ideal society and the reality of human selfishness?
11. How would the story differ if Orwell had seen what we are seeing now? With globalization, with climate collapse, with continued population expansion, are there any other events that might occur at Animal Farm?
12. How does the pastoral setting of the story inform how we understand the characters and themes?

Further Reading

The George Orwell Society Webpage

<https://orwellsociety.com/>

The Curse of Knowledge in Reasoning about False Beliefs -
Birch and Bloom

<https://minddevlab.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/The%20curse%20of%20knowledge%20in%20reasoning%20about%20false%20beliefs.pdf>

The Dual Purpose of Animal Farm - Paul Kirschner

http://mrhausersenglish.weebly.com/uploads/8/3/1/8/8318158/dual_purposes_of_animal_farm_lit._crit..pdf

Some Interpretations are More Equal Than Others:

Misinterpreting George Orwell's Animal Farm - Rebecca Herring

<https://pitjournal.unc.edu/article/some-interpretations-are-more-equal-others-misinterpreting-george-orwells-animal-farm>

A story on George Orwell getting himself thrown in prison
to do some research. - The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/04/george-orwell-jail-time-unseen-court-records>

Discussing The Undiscussables: Too Many White Progressives
Believe In 'Animal Farm Equality' - Dana Brownlee

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/danabrownlee/2021/12/05/discussing-the-undiscussables-too-many-white-progressives-believe-in-animal-farm-equality/?sh=4da557c4397b>

Why Obamacare is Just Like George Orwell's Animal Farm
- Dennis Foley

<https://710keel.com/why-obamacare-is-just-like-george-orwells-animal-farm-op-ed/>