

The
SHAKESPEARE
Theatre of
New Jersey

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**THE TIME
OF YOUR LIFE**

**a study
guide**

compiled and arranged by
the Education Department of
The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

by William Saroyan

The Time of Your Life: A Brief Introduction

Much like many of Chekhov's plays, *The Time of Your Life* might be said to be less concerned with the unfolding of events than with the characters and their interactions. Relatively little "happens" in the course of the play, although numerous major events (such as the impending war and the longshoremen's strike) are alluded to.

The regulars at Nick's bar hang out through the afternoon and evening of one day in October 1939, drinking, placing bets, playing cards and pinball, and conversing with one another and with the patrons who stop by the bar. The wealthy, enigmatic Joe, who has been in the bar for six months, morning to night, strikes up a conversation with the lonely, troubled prostitute Kitty Duval. Two out-of-work young men, Harry— who dreams of success as a vaudeville comedian— and Wesley, a gifted black pianist, drift into the bar and are given jobs by Nick.

The peaceful mood in the bar is then interrupted by the arrival of Blick, the chief of the San Francisco Police Department's Vice Squad, who threatens to close Nick's bar down if the saloon-keeper doesn't take steps to keep prostitutes out of his establishment. Nick tells Blick to leave, insisting that he doesn't pry into his customers' private lives, but Blick says he will return that evening.

The longshoreman McCarthy and the street cop Krupp, childhood friends who now find themselves on opposite sides of the labor dispute at the docks, drop by to converse with Joe. Tom, Joe's sidekick, who has fallen in love with Kitty, comes in to ask for Joe's help comforting the distraught Kitty. And an old drifter who looks like the legendary mountain man Kit Carson wanders in and begins relating tall tales of his life.

Barroom settings have a long history in American theatre, from 19th-century melodrama through Eugene O'Neill and "Cheers," perhaps because few other places in American society have traditionally allowed such a broad cross-section of the public to meet and mingle. Tina Landau, who has directed *The Time of Your Life* at Steppenwolf Theatre Company and American Conservatory Theatre describes it as "a pure ensemble play in which a society of people live, work and play together... Nick's serves as a place for people to meet, to debate, to rest, to make a connection that's meaningful." One of the play's central conflicts has to do with Nick's unwillingness to restrict "undesirables" from his bar. For Saroyan, this democratic openness makes Nick's bar a microcosm of his ideal America, in which "no one is competing with anyone else. No one hates anyone else. Every man is living, and letting live."

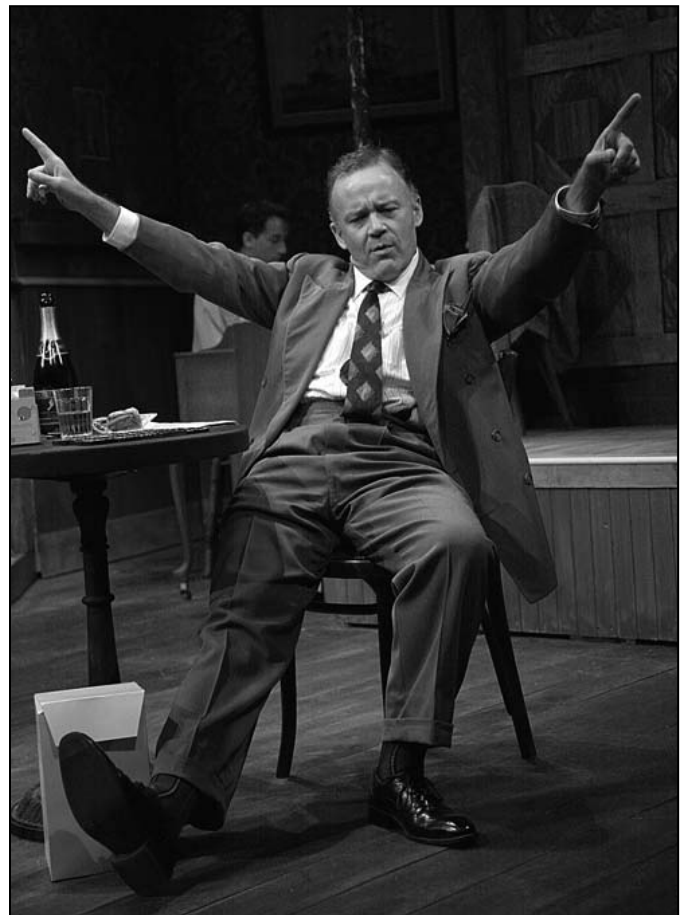
This idealized quality means that *The Time of Your Life* is, to some extent, timeless, even though it is steeped in the real events and issues of 1939. The poverty and joblessness of the Great Depression, clashes between business and organized labor, and the looming World War are continually referenced, but primarily to underscore the plight of the "little guy" (and the little place) that will be swallowed up without a trace if attention is not paid. "I wonder what kind of a place Pribor was?" Joe muses, reading a newspaper article about Hitler's invasion of "little, lovely, lonely Czechoslovakia."

Throughout the play, Nick and Joe represent a vision of America in which people of all races and ethnicities are embraced and nurtured. Past misdeeds are forgiven, and overlooked talents are

discovered and celebrated. Joe describes his activities as research to reveal "something of beauty in a place or in a person where by all rights only ugliness or death should be revealed."

Another key element of *The Time of Your Life* is music, and Landau has suggested that the play itself "functions like a piece of music." It is probably significant that Saroyan's own first theatrical experiences were with touring vaudeville shows that he avidly attended as a boy growing up in Fresno, California. In a review of a recent production, critic Jack Foley suggests that *The Time of Your Life* is structured like vaudeville: "People in *The Time of Your Life* come onstage, do their 'numbers,' and then retire. They all have 'acts' to perform; everyone watches everyone else." Foley sees an affinity with the plays of George M. Cohan, "plays which are essentially vaudeville lifted wholesale into the 'legitimate' theatre."

The large cast size and Saroyan's fall from literary grace during the period from 1950-1990 meant that *The Time of Your Life* was rarely produced or even read over the last few decades. Nevertheless, there has been a revival of interest in Saroyan's work in recent years, accompanied by several high-profile productions of the play. As the Saroyan centennial approaches in 2008, it is likely that readers and playgoers will continue to rediscover what *Time* magazine once called "a paean to the essential goodness in life and people, a chant of love for the scorned and rejected."



Andrew Weems as Joe in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's 2007 production of *The Time of Your Life*. Photo copyright Gerry Goodstein.

About the Author: William Saroyan

William Saroyan was born in 1908 in Fresno, California to an Armenian immigrant family. Two years later, the family moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. Saroyan's father, a minister who only found work in his adopted country as a farm laborer, became ill and died in 1911. Saroyan's mother was unable to simultaneously provide and care for her young children (including the toddler William, two older sisters and a brother), so the children were placed in an Oakland orphanage while she worked as a maid in San Francisco. Saroyan and his siblings lived in the orphanage until he was seven, an experience that deeply marked him.

In 1915, Saroyan's mother was able to move the family back to Fresno. As an elementary school student, William Saroyan was a voracious reader and writer, but was also stubborn and rebellious. In one incident, Saroyan, assigned to write 50 words on how he had spent his summer vacation, turned in a 500-word essay on what was wrong with the people of Fresno, earning a public scolding from his teacher. In later life, Saroyan insisted that his real education came from his work as a paperboy on the streets of Fresno, which began at age seven. "To be a writer is to be in the streets," he said.

At age 15, Saroyan dropped out of high school, determined to make a living as a writer. In 1926, he moved back to San Francisco and two years later, at barely 20, he published his first short story in *Overland Monthly*. His first volume of collected short stories, *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories*, was published in the fall of 1934 and was a popular success, although the reviews were mostly critical.

As a young boy, Saroyan was fascinated by theatre as well, especially the song-and-dance and comedy acts of Fresno's vaudeville houses. In 1919, he was enthralled by the sight of his Uncle Aram on stage in a production of Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* at Fresno High School (although he later deemed Ibsen "a dull playwright"). As a young man, Saroyan had the opportunity to see many Broadway productions on tour in San Francisco.

In 1939, Harold Clurman, founder of New York's cutting-edge Group Theatre, commissioned Saroyan to write his first play. *My Heart's in the Highlands* was produced by the Group Theatre as a stylized, experimental fable, aggrieving Saroyan, who believed he had written a realistic play. Despite his lack of any formal theatre training, Saroyan would become notorious for battling and badgering directors, actors and producers over the treatment of his plays. With *My Heart's in the Highlands* still running, Saroyan took just six days to draft his second play, *The Time of Your Life*, based on a real San Francisco bar, Izzy's, frequented by the author and numerous down-and-out San Franciscans.

The Time of Your Life was produced in October 1939 by the Theatre Guild. It ran on Broadway for 22 weeks, not enough to earn back its production costs, but it became the first play to win both the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize in playwriting. Ever determined to provoke and challenge, Saroyan declined the Pulitzer, arguing that cash prizes serve to diminish the work of artists.

In 1941, Saroyan, like many playwrights of the period, was hired by Hollywood. His time at MGM resulted in the Academy Award-winning *The Human Comedy*, but Saroyan soured on Hollywood almost as soon as he had arrived. His frustration at his lack of creative control within the studio system led to his removal from the

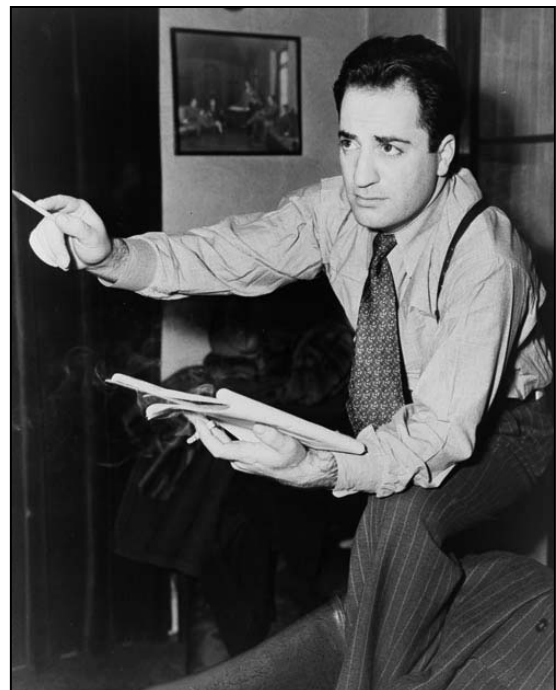
project. As *The Human Comedy* moved on to its critical and box office success as a film, Saroyan rushed to adapt his screenplay as an equally successful novel.

In 1942, Saroyan was drafted into the Army, and was stationed in New York for almost two years, during which time he met and married 18-year-old debutante Carol Marcus, with whom he subsequently had two children, author Aram Saroyan and actress Lucy Saroyan. The couple's relationship was rocky almost from the start-- Saroyan's drinking and gambling problems took a heavy toll on the marriage, and they divorced in 1949, remarried in 1951, and divorced again the following year. Aram Saroyan later described the situation as "a kind of sustained agony."

During the 1940s, Saroyan was one of the superstars of the literary world, along with Steinbeck and Hemingway. By the 1950s, however, while he continued to churn out plays, short stories and novels, he was no longer a popular or critical success. Many critics charged that his sentimental, optimistic fiction was no longer relevant after World War II. In the 1960s, Saroyan turned his hand to memoirs that detailed his lifelong battles with authority figures and passionate belief in individual freedom. These writings were greatly influential to a younger generation of writers, including Jack Kerouac and J. D. Salinger.

In old age, Saroyan split his time between Paris and Fresno. He lived alone and somewhat reclusively. Despite his loss of fame and fortune, Saroyan refused to stop working or to succumb to despair: "I'm growing old! I'm falling apart! And IT'S VERY INTERESTING!" he told interviewer Herbert Gold in 1979.

On May 18, 1981, Saroyan died of cancer at the age of 72. According to his wishes, his remains were divided between a cemetery in Fresno and his family's ancestral home in Armenia.



William Saroyan, 1940. From the archives of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

The Times of *The Time of Your Life*

January 1939: German physicists discover the process of nuclear fission; U.S. scientists replicate their results shortly thereafter. U.S. Workers' Union president Tom Mooney is released from prison after being jailed since 1916.

February 1939: John Steinbeck publishes *The Grapes of Wrath*. The U.S. Congress bans sit-down strikes.

March 1939: Adolf Hitler publishes *Mein Kampf*. German troops seize Czechoslovakia and parts of Lithuania.

April 1939: Hitler nullifies non-aggression treaties with Poland. African-American singer Marion Anderson gives a triumphant concert at the Lincoln Memorial after an incident earlier in the year in which the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let her sing at Constitution Hall because of her race.

May 1939: German and Italian officials form a military alliance.

June 1939: The SS St. Louis, carrying almost 1,000 German Jewish refugees, is denied permission to dock in Florida, after being similarly turned away in both Canada and Cuba. In what became known as "the Voyage of the Damned," the ship returned to Europe, where many of its passengers became victims of the Nazis.

July 1939: As part of his New Deal program, President Roosevelt establishes the Federal Works Agency.

August 1939: A non-aggression pact is signed by the German and Soviet governments, including a secret section agreeing upon the partition of Poland between the two nations.

September 1939: German and Soviet troops invade Poland, prompting Great Britain and France to declare war on Nazi Germany. The United States maintains its neutrality in the conflict, although President Roosevelt declares a "limited national emergency."

October 1939: Hitler publicly announces plans to resolve the so-called "Jewish problem." German Jews are ordered to wear a star of David at all times. President Roosevelt issues an executive order closing U.S. waters to submarines. Albert Einstein writes to the president, urging him to launch a federal initiative to develop an atomic weapon before the Nazis do so.

Terminology of the Great Depression

burlesque: A form of popular entertainment in the early 20th century, burlesque typically mixed broad satirical comedy and striptease. While racy, burlesque was typically not considered indecent. In *The Time of Your Life*, Kitty claims to have been a burlesque star who had "flowers sent to [her] by European royalty." By 1939, burlesque had seen most of its audience vanish in favor of the newest form of popular entertainment, motion pictures.

vaudeville: Another form of live popular entertainment that was practically dead by 1939, vaudeville was the direct ancestor of the TV variety show, mingling stand-up comedy, musical acts, dance, magic tricks, and other novelty acts. Vaudeville was typically "cleaner," family-friendly entertainment as compared to burlesque, which catered to an all-male audience.

honky-tonk: A slang term for a bar with music or other live entertainment. The term, which originated in the American West, is particularly associated with working-class establishments like Nick's.

Heifetz: Jascha Heifetz was a Lithuanian violin virtuoso. Born in 1901, he was a professional musician by age 7, and became an overnight world celebrity when he gave his first American concert at age 16. In the play, Nick refers to Wesley's piano-playing as "better than Heifetz," whereupon Joe reminds him that "Heifetz plays the violin."

snooker: A form of pool played on a large table, snooker was particularly popular from the 1920s-1940s. To be "behind the eight-ball" is to be in imminent danger of losing.

panatelas: A long thin Cuban cigar.

Kit Carson: A legendary explorer, soldier and mountain man of the American West, the real Christopher "Kit" Carson lived from 1809-1868. By the 1930s, Kit Carson had become a mythical figure in numerous Western movies, comic books, and stories for boys.

"Amos and Andy": A popular radio dramedy of the 1920s-1950s that depicted the lives of two African-American farmhands from Georgia who seek a better life by moving to Harlem. As Krupp's description suggests, the show drew a huge and loyal daily audience—the phrase "holy mackerel" originated with the show's writers.



"Kit Carson" (Edmond Genest) spins his tall tales for Joe (Andrew Weems) as the patrons of Nick's Bar listen in, including Paul Meshejian, Megan Irene Davis, Gregory Derelian and Anthony Stokes, in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's 2007 Main Stage production of *The Time of Your Life*. Photo copyright Gerry Goodstein.

Commentary and Criticism

“There’s simplicity, innocence, goodness and greatness in the American people, particularly the lowest of them... If they’re left alone and have a chance, they’re good people. There’s good in all people.”

—William Saroyan

“Compassion and perception, laughter and pity, are fused in Saroyan’s plays into one of the richest experiences provided by the American theatre.”

—John Gassner

“It functions like a piece of music... more musical and hallucinatory than a linear narrative play. Saroyan once said it’s a circus, an essay, a vaudeville, an opera, a debate about money, a comedy, a tragedy, a lecture— anything you want it to be. It was way out there, radical and all over the map for its time.”

—Tina Landau

“A prose poem in ragtime... original, breezy and deeply felt.”

—Brooks Atkinson

“*The Time of Your Life* is a ramshackle affair, mildly amusing when it is content to be a vaudeville. It has no center and its surface is fatally smeared over with a sticky sweetness.”

—Brendan Gill

“[Saroyan has the ability to] look at the world with the eyes of a sensitive newsboy, and to see it eternally brand-new and touched with wonder. While he may be puerile and arrogant and sentimental, he is never cheap.”

—Mary McCarthy

“[*The Time of Your Life*] is set in a San Francisco waterfront honky-tonk, through which twenty-six strongly individualized persons pass, each one of whom expresses one facet of the character of mankind..... Each character of the play, isolated in some degree from every other one, is trying in his own way to discover how to live in a way that life may seem filled with delight.”

—Winifred L. Dusenberry

“What we discover in the work of this most famous and prolific of Armenian-American writers is a lifelong tension between the forces of good-humored acceptance and the more insistent voice of his own experience as the orphaned son of an Armenian immigrant.”

—Margaret Bedrosian

“We’ve seen them come and go. Good ones too. Better ones than you, Mr. Saroyan. We’ve seen them go a long way and we’ve seen them not come back and nobody even asked where they had gone. They forget quick, Mr. Saroyan.”

—Ernest Hemingway



Above, labor organizer Harry Bridges leads San Francisco longshoremen in a Labor Day parade, 1939. Photo from the ILWU Library, San Francisco.

Below, an unemployed man and a failed restaurant on “Skid Row,” San Francisco’s Howard Street, as photographed by Dorothea Lange in February 1937. From the archives of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



Saroyan's San Francisco

Although Saroyan spent much of his life away from San Francisco, his attachment to the city was profound and lifelong. Both as a young boy housed at the Fred Finch Orphanage with his brother and sisters, and as a young man starting his writing career, Saroyan had some of his formative experiences there.

When the 2-year-old Saroyan arrived in San Francisco in 1910, he was plunged into a city that was also in a kind of infancy. Although San Francisco had grown up around the Spanish mission that was established in 1776, the devastating earthquake and fire of 1906 led to the almost complete rebuilding of the city. "Not in history has a modern imperial city been so completely destroyed," wrote Jack London, "San Francisco is gone."

Rebuilding was so swift, however, that by 1915 San Francisco was celebrating its splendid rebirth

by hosting the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, a world's fair that featured, among other things, a 435-foot tower encrusted in glass "jewels" and illuminated by new electric searchlights.

The California Gold Rush had established banking as a major San Francisco industry— Bank of America, the largest commercial bank in the United States, began as San Francisco's Bank of Italy— and despite the stock market crash of 1929, not a single San Francisco-based bank failed in the Great Depression. The city's thriving seaport and connections to the agricultural communities in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys ensured that it remained busy even as jobs vanished in much of the rest of the country.

The Port of San Francisco became the principal site of one of the

San Francisco itself is art. Above all literary art. Every block is a short story, every hill a novel. Every home a poem, every dweller-within immortal. That is the whole truth.

-William Saroyan

key labor disputes of the Great Depression, the 1934 West Coast Longshoremen's Strike, elements of which are alluded to in *The Time of Your Life*. Longshoremen and sailors demanding stronger union protection walked out, bringing the busy port to a standstill. Businesses attempted to bring in strikebreakers, with police protection, and violence broke out. On July 5, a clash between rock-throwing strikers and police armed with tear gas resulted in a shooting incident that killed two protesters. As the California National Guard moved into the city to maintain order, angry residents

agreed to a general strike which closed almost business in the city for four days. Meanwhile anti-Communist vigilantes, with the tacit approval and protection of the National Guard and the city police, attacked labor halls, soup kitchens and bookstores run by the unions.

The colorful mixture of immigrants, sailors, and Depression-era drifters looking for a better life in San Francisco's comparatively healthy economy formed the rich ensemble of Saroyan's bar-stool neighbors at his favorite bar, Izzy's. A waterfront steakhouse owned and operated by the colorful Izzy Gomez, who had himself arrived in San Francisco as a penniless 18-year-old immigrant from Portugal, Izzy's catered to blue-collar workers and hard-luck cases. "Izzy Gomez's was something else. Unique. Sui generis," Saroyan wrote. "It really was as portrayed in *The Time of Your Life*, except that it was also a hangout for hard-boiled, sophisticated newspapermen... He gave a considerable number of meals and liquor out free, not just to starving artists, but to people he liked."

The Great Depression in History and Literature

The Time of Your Life takes place against the backdrop of the Great Depression and the build-up to the United States' entry into World War II. Like many other writers of the time, William Saroyan was profoundly affected by the Great Depression and explored the impact of current events in his fiction.

The Great Depression was a major economic downturn lasting for slightly more than 10 years, from 1929 to 1941, marked by pervasive unemployment, low prices and profits, and high poverty. Economists have offered many theories to explain the complex set of circumstances that led to the Depression, but one event that clearly marked the beginning of the disaster was the stock market crash of October 1929. In one week, the U.S. stock market lost \$30 billion in value— this amount may seem comparatively small today, but in historical context, \$30 billion was more than ten times the annual federal budget in 1929.

In the wake of the crash, bankruptcies, business closures and layoffs swept across the country. Although the stock market itself had already begun to recover, deeply indebted consumers panicked, withdrawing money from banks, postponing major purchases, and eschewing investment. This created a kind of "vicious cycle" in which consumer actions siphoned money away from banks, which in return siphoned money out of the larger economy. Closures of small banks led to closures of small businesses, and by 1932, 25% of the American work force was unemployed. Shanty towns sprang up in cities across the country as internally displaced persons flocked anywhere that might offer them work.

The economic crisis was further compounded by a natural disaster, the Great "Dust Bowl" drought of 1933-1939, which devastated

farms and farmers throughout the Midwest, from Texas to Canada. A combination of poor farming practices and drought generated massive dust storms that blackened the sky and ruined crops. In May of 1934, South Dakota dirt rained down like snow on the city of Chicago. Over 500,000 Midwesterners lost their farms and their homes to foreclosure, and became an army of barefoot refugees (frequently referred to as "Okies," because more than 15% of the population of Oklahoma became part of this exodus). As documented in the writings of Steinbeck, Saroyan and others, many of these migrants eventually made their way to California, where agriculture was still a major industry.

1932 saw a new Democratic President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and a sweeping Democratic majority elected to Congress. With this broad mandate, Roosevelt immediately abandoned the wait-and-see policies of his predecessor, Herbert Hoover, and began attacking the causes and effects of the Depression wholesale with a vast array of new federal programs known as "the New Deal"— from Roosevelt's nomination acceptance speech in which he had promised "a new deal for the American people." Dozens of new federal agencies were created to offer "relief, recovery and reform." Controversial regulations on banking and business were introduced, and unionization received federal support in an effort to get people working, earning and spending money once again.

Although the economy began to recover in many ways, unemployment remained high throughout the 1930s. The major recovery in jobs and wages coincided with U.S. entry into World War II, prompted by the attack on Pearl Harbor. Federal military spending, and the accompanying surge in war-related

manufacturing brought millions of people back to work. As young men were called up to fight, a labor shortage actually developed which saw millions of women working outside the home for the first time.

Not only were artists of every kind moved to document and analyze the social changes occurring around them during the Depression, New Deal programs actually provided them with significant federal aid in doing so. The Roosevelt administration believed that the public needed a boost in morale as well as more tangible aid, and sections of the government-sponsored employment agency known as the Works Progress Administration were devoted to supporting theatre, music and visual arts.

Although critics charged that these efforts were a wasteful exercise in liberal propaganda, many young artists, including Ralph Ellison and Jackson Pollock, were able to continue working thanks to the WPA arts programs. Never before (or since) had the federal government supported the arts on this scale. Much of the extensive visual and literary documentation of the Depression era is thanks to these programs' "people-first" focus on American communities, culture, and the lives and experiences of ordinary people. John Steinbeck described the collections of oral history and folklore created by the Federal Writers Project as "the most comprehensive account of the United States... compiled by the best writers in America." Many African-American writers rose to prominence from work sponsored by the WPA, including not just Ellison, but Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston.

The Depression created an abundance of both escapist literature (it was the golden age of the mystery novel) and gritty social realism focused on the plight of the worker. At New York's influential Group Theatre, which produced Saroyan's first play, the opening night audience for Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* joined the actors at curtain call in chanting "Strike! Strike! Strike!" in support of New York taxi drivers.

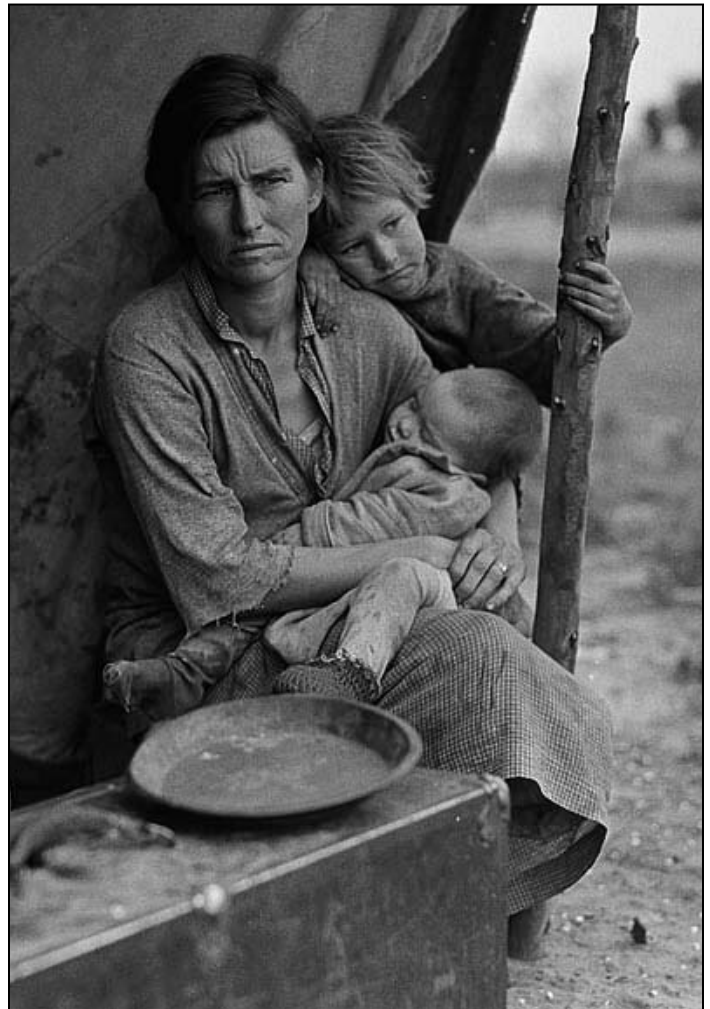
Saroyan's fellow Californian John Steinbeck was perhaps the quintessential American author of the Great Depression, chronicling the lives of the working poor with a reporter's eye for detail and a poet's ear for language. In accepting the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962, Steinbeck spoke for many of the writers of his generation when he stated that literary artists had a profound social responsibility: "to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit... In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally flags." Steinbeck, like Saroyan, believed that his literature could be a force for hope and progress in the struggles of the Great Depression.

William Saroyan was famously prickly and often combative in his relationships with fellow writers. His pride and his stubborn sense that it was his very lack of formal education that made him a great writer made it almost impossible for him to have a collegial relationship with his contemporaries. Nevertheless, he shared many of their goals and convictions, using his writing to champion the causes of fellow immigrants, workers, and the poor and downtrodden generally. In the midst of the worldwide upheaval of the Depression and World War II, Saroyan continued to proclaim his optimism, his faith in the American dream, and his belief in the universal brotherhood of man. "The role of art is to make a world which can be inhabited," he once wrote.

Like many other Depression-era writers, Saroyan's sympathy for the working class led to accusations of Communism, but he was actually a staunch individualist throughout his life. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Saroyan laced all of his work with humor and believed that literature should be, ultimately, an uplifting experience. This in turn led to extensive criticism of his writing, both at the time and to this day, as trivial, sentimental, or

sugar-coated. Still, Saroyan firmly believed that, even if he made use of humor as well as poetic and symbolic devices, his writing was fundamentally a realistic account of the American people in difficult times.

For Saroyan and his fellow writers and artists, the Great Depression was the catalyst for remarkable artistic achievements as well as a vast project of social history. We owe much of our understanding of this tumultuous period in American history to the output of the nation's artists.



A migrant mother and her children, as photographed by Dorothea Lange in Nipomo, California, 1936. From the archives of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

William Saroyan and the Armenian-American Experience

The first recorded Armenian immigrant to North America arrived long before the birth of William Saroyan or even the creation of the United States. In 1618, the records of the Jamestown colony in Virginia record the arrival of one “Martin the Armenian.” A significant influx of Armenians did not occur, however, until the late 19th century, when ethnic violence in their native country began to drive many families abroad.

Armenia is a mountainous region in the Caucasus mountains, extending from portions of modern-day Turkey into the former Soviet Union. Armenia has been inhabited continuously since pre-historic times, and Herodotus names the Armenians as a distinct ethnicity within the multi-ethnic army of the Persian Empire in his histories of the Greco-Persian wars. In 301, Armenia became the first nation in the world to adopt Christianity as the state religion, and Christianity has continued to be the dominant religion among ethnic Armenians to this day.

Armenia passed first into Byzantine hands, and then into the Arabic empire of the caliphs of Baghdad, briefly regained independence, and then passed back through the hands of the Byzantines, the Seljuk Turks, and the Mongols. During the 1500s, the majority of Armenia was absorbed into the Turkish Ottoman Empire. As Christians within an Islamic nation, the Armenians faced some discrimination under Ottoman rule, but were generally allowed to live in relative peace.

Bloodshed would return to Armenia during the rule of the Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909). Inheriting an aging, diverse empire that was increasingly threatened by separatist movements from within and Russian invasion from without, Abdul Hamid tried to hold his country together with a combination of modest political reforms and military repression. Armenian protests in 1892 and 1893 were met with pogroms from 1894-96 in which perhaps 100,000-300,000 Armenians were massacred, primarily by Kurdish vigilantes who were assisted and protected by the Turkish army. It was feared that the Armenians would naturally support a Russian invasion aimed at overthrowing their Muslim overlords, and Abdul Hamid was determined to crush the Armenian independence movement once and for all.

The Hamidian massacres, as they became known, only fanned the flames of Armenian anger, and in 1907 the nascent Armenian Revolutionary Federation attempted to assassinate the sultan. Abdul Hamid was forced from the throne in 1909, ushering in a chaotic and violent era for Turkey. The fact that the Russian army in World War I included units of Armenian freedom fighters only confirmed the worst fears of many ethnic Turks.

What happened next is the subject of one of the bitterest controversies in 20th-century history, in part because it is highly unclear who was actually making decisions in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire. What is indisputable is that a great number of Armenian civilians in Turkey lost their lives between 1915 and 1917, in what is frequently referred to as the “Armenian genocide.”

Armenians were one of the largest ethnic minorities in the empire, and had a long history of separatist agitation. In 1914, the Turkish army was routed by the Russians in the Caucasus region, and government propaganda stated that the loss was due to Armenian betrayals. A few months later, the Ottoman government passed laws authorizing the forced deportation of Armenians and the

confiscation of their property. According to official Turkish history, this was a response to near-civil war in the Armenian region; according to Armenian historians (and numerous independent accounts), it was the first example of modern large-scale genocide. Concentration camps were set up to facilitate, at least ostensibly, the transport of the Armenians, and numerous men, women and children perished en route to these camps, or while housed in them. Estimates of the loss of life range widely from 300,000 to more than 1.5 million.

Fortunately, many Armenians had emigrated in the years between 1894 and 1914, and still more refugees arrived in the U.S. during and following World War I. The majority of these Armenians settled in California, where they found a climate and terrain similar to their homeland. Armenians played a key role in bringing the cultivation of figs to California. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, there have been many prominent Armenian-Americans, including the tennis star Andre Agassi, the actor and playwright Eric Bogosian, the basketball coach Jerry Tarkanian, and president of the Carnegie Foundation Vartan Gregorian (not to mention Cher and System of a Down).

William Saroyan was a first-generation immigrant, and the only member of his immediate family born in the United States. As such, he was keenly aware of his family’s cultural differences from the “American” children around him, and he directly experienced anti-immigrant prejudice as a child in San Francisco and Fresno. While he wrote and spoke in Armenian, as well as English, his ethnic heritage was not necessarily a key element in his earlier writings. “I do not believe in races... If I have any desire at all, it is to show the brotherhood of man,” he wrote in 1935. Recounting his first visit to the country of his origins in the same year, he explained that “I love Armenian people... because they are a part of the enormous human race.... There is no Armenia; there is no America... there is only the earth.”

Saroyan was sometimes criticized by the more politically-outspoken members of the Armenian-American community for this stance, and as he grew older, his devotion to Armenian issues did indeed grow more passionate. Even as early as 1936, he was writing:

Destroy Armenia. See if you can do it. Send them from their homes into the desert. Let them have neither bread nor water. Burn their houses and their churches. See if the race will not live again when two of them meet in a beer parlor, twenty years after, and laugh, and speak in their tongue. Go ahead, see if you can do anything about it. See if you can stop them from mocking the big ideas of the world, you sons of bitches, a couple of Armenians talking in the world, go ahead and try to destroy them....for when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a new Armenia!

Saroyan’s feelings for Armenia were not mere nationalistic pride, however, but were related to his deep concern for humanity as a whole. As he put it: “I love Armenia and I love America and I belong to both, but I am only this: an inhabitant of the earth, and so are you, whoever you are...”

Additional Topics for Discussion

About the Play

1. Some critics feel that *The Time of Your Life* suffers artistically from the central role which Saroyan gave to the character of Joe, arguing that Joe is poorly-defined and takes no real action in the course of the play. Do you agree? What do you think Saroyan's intent was in depicting Joe as he did? What is the significance of Joe's role in the play?
2. Although it is never depicted in the play, the longshoremen's strike at the nearby docks is referenced several times. What is the significance of the strike as a backdrop to the play's events? Why do you think Saroyan keeps bringing it up if it is not an integral part of the plot?
3. In his opening stage directions, Saroyan refers to Nick's bar as "an American place." What makes it distinctively American? Based on the evidence in the play, what qualities did Saroyan feel were "American."
4. Dreams and aspirations are a major theme of *The Time of Your Life*. Would you describe the characters gathered in the bar as "idle dreamers?" Are they in Nick's to try and forget how their dreams have been quashed by society? Or does their time "loafing" together in Nick's somehow equip and assist them in pursuing their dreams?
5. In the course of the play, we discover a good deal about the ethnic origins of most of the characters, and that most of them are immigrants or the children of immigrants. As with the strike, immigration does not *seem* to play a major role in the plot. If this is true, why does Saroyan take pains to reveal that so many of the characters come from an immigrant background? Does immigration have a larger, symbolic significance in this play?

About this Production

1. Both the author, William Saroyan, and the director of this production, Paul Mullins, have given music a central role in *The Time of Your Life*. What do you think is the significance of these particular songs and of music generally in the play? Why is Joe so interested in "The Missouri Waltz?" Why are there so many musically-talented characters in this play?
2. This production also uses a number of very specific props that are called for in the script. What is the significance of these objects—the antique toys, for example—in the play? Why do the characters invest so much meaning in these specific items?
3. Why do you think the scenic designer for this production chose to make Nick's bar below street level? How does this choice enhance your understanding of the play's setting?

Follow-up Activities

1. Write a review of this production. Be sure to include specific information and your own reactions to both the acting and the design elements (like lights, set, costumes and sound). Explain what you liked about the production, and what you disliked, and support your opinions. Then submit your review to The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's Education Department, or see if it can be published in your school newspaper.
2. *Boxed Characters*: William Saroyan uses numerous specific objects in a symbolic way in *The Time of Your Life*. Select one of the characters in the play and fill a shoebox with small objects that reflect his or her personality. Be as creative as possible. These boxes can be displayed in the classroom with a written statement or an oral presentation.
3. *Postcards from Nick's*: Most of the characters in *The Time of Your Life* arrived in San Francisco from elsewhere, whether another state or another country. Create a postcard or postcards using appropriate 1930s images and written in the voice of one of the characters from the play, Kitty to her family back in the Midwest, for example, or the Newsboy to his relatives in Greece.
4. *Improv Images*: Use Depression-era photographs such as those included in this study guide, or others, as prompts for improvisation. Groups of 2-3 students should arrange themselves into the positions of the figures in the photograph, and begin a scene based on the image. If you wish, allow the scene to establish, then call out "freeze" and have a new student replace one of the actors in the scene, unfreeze, and continue.
5. *Ten Years Later*: *The Time of Your Life* foreshadows major changes in the world and lives of the characters, set as it is on the cusp of America's entry into World War II. ("Let's hurry," Elsie says to Dudley, "before they dress you, stand you in line, hand you a gun, and have you kill and be killed.") What do you think might become of each of these characters during the war years? Try writing a short story or plot synopsis in which you reveal the future of one or more of the characters, using what you already know about them from the play.

Teachers:

Do you have activities or exercises to suggest for this play? We are always looking for new ideas to inspire students (and teachers). Send your suggestions to info@ShakespeareNJ.org, and we will share them with other teachers, or maybe even include them in future study guides.



Test Your Understanding

1. *The Time of Your Life* is set in:
 - a) Armenia
 - b) New York
 - c) San Francisco
 - d) Fresno
2. Harry's dream is to become:
 - a) a singer
 - b) a comedian
 - c) a businessman
 - d) a soldier
3. Blick is:
 - a) the head of the Vice Squad
 - b) the head of the Organized Crime Squad
 - c) the precinct captain
 - d) the head of the strikebreakers
4. In the play, Joe says that out of every 24 hours, at least 23 1/2 are spent:
 - a) talking
 - b) waiting
 - c) drinking
 - d) dreaming
5. The Newsboy boasts about his:
 - a) "Irish eyes"
 - b) "salesmanship"
 - c) "nose for news"
 - d) "great lyric tenor"
6. The friends McCarthy and Krupp are:
 - a) a longshoreman and a cop
 - b) a sailor and a soldier
 - c) a labor leader and a lawyer
 - d) Salvation Army workers
7. Kitty says that her past career was in:
 - a) nursing
 - b) opera
 - c) burlesque
 - d) farming
8. What did "Kit Carson" supposedly do in Toledo, Ohio in 1918?
 - a) Fall in love with a midget
 - b) Herd cows on a bicycle
 - c) Lasso a tornado
 - d) Wrestle a bear
9. According to Elsie, what is "impossible in this world?"
 - a) love
 - b) justice
 - c) achieving one's dreams
 - d) avoiding a war
10. Where does Joe take Tom and Kitty?
 - a) to Mexico
 - b) to San Diego
 - c) for a walk on the piers
 - d) for a drive on the oceanfront
11. What does "Kit Carson" teach Joe?
 - a) How to chew gum.
 - b) How to load a gun.
 - c) How to play the harmonica.
 - d) How to skin a bear.
12. What kind of job does Joe arrange for Tom?
 - a) selling toys
 - b) selling newspapers
 - c) working on the docks
 - d) driving a truck
13. Blick tries to force Kitty to:
 - a) sing a song
 - b) speak Polish
 - c) perform a striptease
 - d) move out of the St. Francis hotel
14. Who defends Kitty and is attacked by Blick?
 - a) Nick
 - b) Joe
 - c) "Kit Carson"
 - d) Wesley
15. Who shoots and kills Blick?
 - a) "Kit Carson"
 - b) Joe
 - c) Nick
 - d) Krupp

Meeting NJ Core Curriculum Standards

With New Jersey’s implementation of the Core Curriculum Content Standards, teachers and administrators are seeking programs and materials that will help achieve these new classroom requirements. By merely viewing a performance at The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey and participating in the post-performance discussion, students can meet many Curriculum Standards. The activities included in this study guide, when implemented in the classroom, as well as teacher assigned writing assignments will allow students to meet additional Curriculum Standards.

VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS STANDARDS

The Visual and Performing Arts Standards require students to experience, perform and comment on various forms of fine art. A *Student Matinee Series* performance, and incorporation of the enclosed study guide exercises, will help meet the following Curriculum Standards.

STANDARD 1.1: All students will use aesthetic knowledge in the creation of and in responses to dance, music, theatre and visual arts.

STANDARD 1.2: All students will utilize those skills, media, methods, and technologies appropriate to each of art form in the creation, performance, and presentation of dance, music, theatre and/or visual arts.

STANDARD 1.4: All students will develop, apply and reflect upon knowledge of the process of critique.

STANDARD 1.5: All students will understand and analyze the role, development, and continuing influence of the arts in relation to world cultures, history, and society.

LANGUAGE ARTS LITERACY STANDARDS

Active listening and responding to what has been presented are two major aspects of the Language Arts Literacy Standard. A performance at The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey can be used as a springboard classes to help students meet the following Standards.

STANDARD 3.2: All students will listen actively in a variety of situations to information from a variety of sources.

STANDARD 3.3: All students will write in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.

SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

Gaining an awareness and understanding of various cultures and cultural influences throughout history is part of the root of the Social Studies Standards. A *Student Matinee* performance can, once again, be used as a springboard into activities that will help meet the following Standard.

STANDARD 6.2: All students will learn democratic citizenship through the humanities, by studying literature, art, history and philosophy, and related fields.

Sources for this study guide and recommended reading:

The Time of Your Life, by William Saroyan. Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939.

Twayne Critical Essays on William Saroyan, edited by Harry Keyishian. Twayne Publishers, 1995.

William Saroyan, by Aram Saroyan. Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1983.

The World of William Saroyan, by Nona Balakian. Bucknell University Press, 1998.

“A Valentine to San Francisco: William Saroyan’s *The Time of Your Life*,” by Misha Berson, *Seattle Times*, March 25, 2004.

“William Saroyan: The Man, The Writer,” a documentary film written and directed by Paul Kalinian, 1991. (www.kalinian-saroyan.com)

The William Saroyan Society website (www.williamsaroyansociety.org)

Today in Literature website (www.todayinliterature.com)

Program notes and study guide for the 2004 American Conservatory Theater production of *The Time of Your Life* (www.act-sf.org)

ENotes study guide for *The Time of Your Life* (www.enotes.com)

Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia (www.wikipedia.org)

Test Your Understanding Answer Key

- | | | | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. c | 2. b | 3. a | 4. b | 5. d | 6. a |
| 7. c | 8. b | 9. a | 10. d | 11. b | 12. d |
| 13. c | 14. d | 15. a | | | |

Other Opportunities for Students... and Teachers

SHAKESPEARE LIVE! EDUCATIONAL TOURING COMPANY

Shakespeare LIVE! is the educational touring company of The Shakespeare Theatre. This dynamic troupe of actors brings exceptional abridged productions of Shakespeare's masterworks directly into the classroom. Workshops are also available in Stage Combat and Shakespeare in Performance.

JUNIOR AND SENIOR CORPS

Young actors are given the opportunity to participate in the excitement of the Theatre's summer season through this program, which offers classes, a final presentation, as well as behind-the-scenes and front-of-house experience. Geared for students in grades 6 through 12, admission to this program is through audition and/or interview.

SUMMER PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAM

For graduating high school seniors and for university students, the intensive Summer Professional Training Program offers acting apprenticeships and professional internships, providing academic training and hands-on experience in acting, technical, artistic and arts management areas. For a full brochure of the opportunities available, please contact the Education Department.

SHAKEFEST: SUMMER SHAKESPEARE INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

Designed for elementary and secondary teachers of Shakespeare, *ShakeFest* is a weeklong intensive filled with myriad practical ways to conquer "ShakesFear" and excite students about the Bard. In hands-on sessions, experienced teaching artists model active and exciting performance-oriented techniques to get students on their feet and "speaking the speech."

SHAKESPERIENCE: NJ STUDENT SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

This annual spring festival, developed in partnership with the Folger Shakespeare Library and Rider University, gives middle and high school classes the opportunity to spend a day at the Theatre experiencing Shakespeare together as both actors and audience. The *Shakespeare: NJ* Festival celebrates the power of performance as a teaching tool on a statewide scale.

About The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

The acclaimed Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey (formerly called "New Jersey Shakespeare Festival") is one of the leading Shakespeare theatres in the nation. Serving nearly 100,000 adults and children annually, it is New Jersey's only professional theatre company dedicated to Shakespeare's canon and other classic masterworks. Through its distinguished productions and education programs, the company strives to illuminate the universal and lasting relevance of the classics for contemporary audiences. The longest-running Shakespeare theatre on the east coast, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey marks its 45th season in 2007.

In addition to producing and presenting classic theatre, the Theatre's mission places an equal focus on education—both for young artists and audiences of all ages. The Theatre nurtures emerging new talent for the American stage and cultivates future audiences by providing extensive student outreach opportunities. Through our work, we endeavor to promote literacy, civilization, community, cultural awareness, the theatrical tradition, and a more enlightened view of the world in which we live and the people with whom we share it.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of 20 professional theatres in the state of New Jersey. The company's dedication to the classics and commitment to excellence sets critical standards for the field. Nationwide, the Theatre has emerged as one of the most exciting "new" theatres under the leadership of Artistic Director, Bonnie J. Monte since 1990. It is one of only a handful of Shakespeare Theatres on the east coast, and in recent years has drawn larger and larger audiences and unprecedented critical acclaim. The opening of the intimate, 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in 1998, provided the Theatre with a state-of-the-art venue with excellent sightlines, and increased access for patrons and artists with disabilities.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is a member of ArtPride, The Shakespeare Theatre Association of America, Theatre Communications Group, and is a founding member of the New Jersey Theatre Alliance.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is an independent, professional theatre located on the Drew University campus.

Funding for the 2007 Student Matinee Series is provided, in part, by a grant from Target.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's programs are made possible, in part, by funding from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/ Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as funds from the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional major support is received from The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the F. M. Kirby Foundation, The Edward T. Cone Foundation, The Shubert Foundation and Drew University, as well as contributions from numerous corporations, foundations, government agencies and individuals. Crystal Rock Bottled Water is the official water supplier of The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey.

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