



## Discussion Guide

Edited by Angelika Dawson

# Welcome to *Trying!*

*Trying* is based on the true story of its playwright, Joanna McClelland Glass and her working relationship with the renowned Justice Francis Biddle. Set in 1967, the play explores the relationship between two very different people: a young woman from Saskatchewan who is looking for meaningful work to counter the loneliness of her marriage, and a retired, elderly judge nearing the end of his life, who is working on his memoirs, his legacy. Both are opinionated and head-strong, making for a dynamic, play filled with humour, tension, and often tender moments.

Glass was born in 1936 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. She became interested in theatre in high school and after graduation she joined the Saskatoon Community Players. She won a scholarship to study acting at the Pasadena Playhouse in California in 1957. In 1959, she moved to New York where she met and married physicist Alexander Glass. She began writing as a young mother of three children and in 1972 her perseverance paid off when her one-act plays, *Canadian Gothic* and *American Modern* premiered at the Manhattan Theatre Club of New York.

*Trying*, written in 2004, premiered in New York, and made its Canadian debut in Ottawa at the National Arts Centre. The play is set during the last year of Judge Biddle's life, when he is coming to terms with his death and his legacy, having served as Attorney General under President Franklin D. Roosevelt and as the primary American judge during the Nuremberg trials. His new secretary, Sarah, wants to do more than be a housewife and mother and has ambitions to become a writer. The intersection of American and Canadian perspectives, and of youth and age informs many of Glass's plays, and *Trying* is a brilliant example of these perspectives. This is a character-driven play and the dialogue between the two reveals so much about the inner world of each character as they explore what their working relationship will be like.

Judge Biddle is a cantankerous, particular fellow with exacting expectations of his secretaries – he goes through them at an alarming rate. “The bathroom is over there. If you're like all the others, you'll go in there to cry” he tells his new secretary. Sarah is a direct, plain-spoken young woman, newly married, but with ambitions and determined to not let this difficult man defeat her. “Perhaps I won't be like all the others,” she responds. “The odds are against it,” he counters. This early banter sets the stage for how their relationship will unfold, what they will learn from one another, and how they will come to be friends.

As we near the second anniversary of living in a pandemic, we can learn much from Judge Biddle and Sarah about how we can overcome what sometimes seems to be unsurmountable differences and learn to appreciate the things that make us human: kindness, grace, and a healthy sense of humour. As always, we hope you enjoy this show!



**Angelika Dawson**  
Editor

## Notes from the Director, Jacq Ainsworth

*Trying* beautifully addresses themes that are close to my heart. The characters both have a strong social conscience and want to work towards a more equitable society. While Sarah is still trying to find her way to becoming a writer who could influence minds with her work, Judge Biddle is struggling to wrap up his varied and influential career, sorting through decades of important writings, memories, and documents. Biddle can't get everything in order by himself, but his poor health and frustration with his own mental lapses make him a trying person to work with. Sarah must decide if she can tolerate his brusque, often rude, behaviour so that this champion of liberal values does not fade out of this world without her securing his legacy.



At the core of our relationships with each other, we find mutual respect, admiration, and joy. Even as people pass out of our lives, the memory of that core stays with us to warm us for ever. I hope that you find as much delight in this production as I have.

I am incredibly grateful for the generous spirit of our cast, who rehearsed in every possible combination, to ensure that our understudies were as prepared as our principal cast. This meant that, in effect, there are four versions of this production that are all beautifully unique!

Thank you to our crew and families, without whose support we would not be able to put on this show happily and successfully!



Cheryl Sileikies & Glen Pinchin in *Trying*. Photo by Veda Maharaj.

# Designer Notes: *Trying*

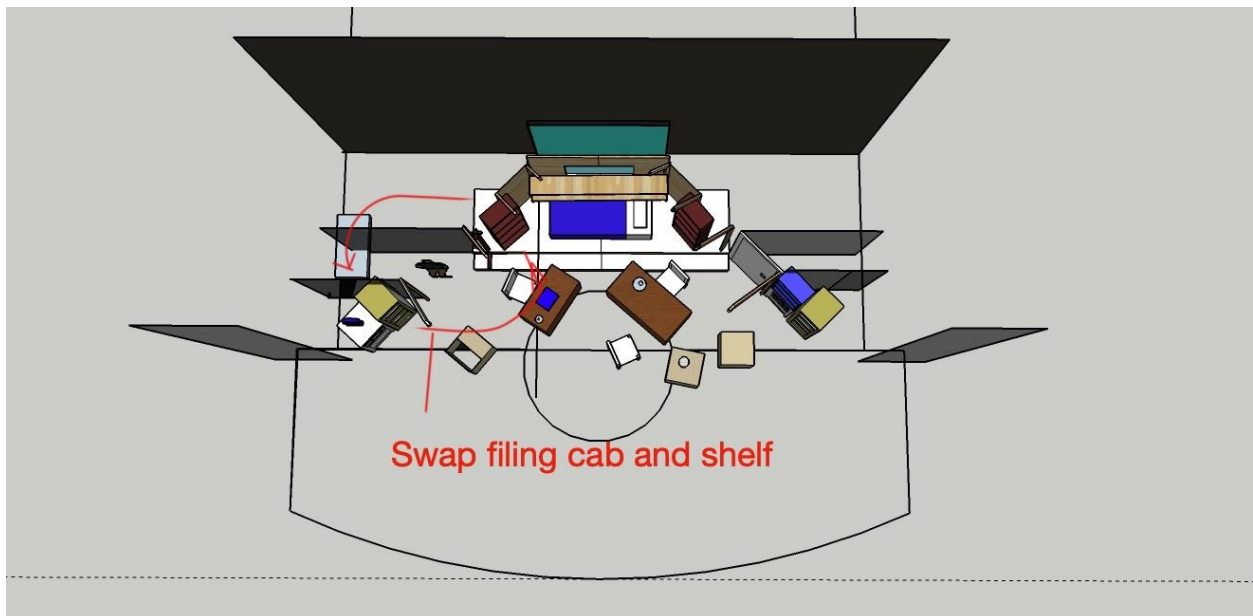


## Set Designer: Andrew Potts

When I approach a new set design, I begin with the script. I am giving the characters the space they must live in for a few weeks, so it needs to be both functional and aesthetically pleasing. The playwright of *Trying* included some very specific set notes—as they based the play in a real place: the Judge’s actual attic office. I saw no point in re-inventing the space, but I did have to think about how it would fit on our particular stage. I chose what’s called a Perspective design, which draws the viewer’s eyes from the outside edges at an angle, into a vanishing point.

I also work closely with the director. I sent my ideas to Jacq and received important feedback before finalizing my design. She knew the feel she wanted at the beginning, and how that changed towards the end, so I tried to reflect that with the set.

I have used some theatrical artistic license to mix realism with symbolism - for example, solid furniture mixed into walls that fade away into black. My challenge was to source and build a realistic 1960s attic office with modern materials. Another challenge was to find creative ways to empty the bookshelves quickly without lengthy scene changes.



Set ground plan by Andrew Potts.





### Costume Designer: Des Hale

Costume design takes so much more time than one would think, even without having to sew a single thing. I tailor my approach to the needs of each show and the resource that I am given.

When a play is set in a particular time period, and particularly when it is based on real people, there can be hours, even days of research. Costume design depends upon the production needs but is also influenced by the choices and the level of detail a designer wants to include. For *Trying*, the costumes needed to fit the time period of the 60s but also be true to each character. I ended up doing 30-60 minutes of research for each type of costume piece, keeping plenty of reference images on hand when searching for items. When hunting for costume pieces, I sometimes spent hours at a time searching through hundreds of items and ending up finding only a few pieces that worked.

The biggest challenge has been the double cast, as it doubled my work. *Trying* has only two characters but it takes place over several months, so there's changing seasons and in each scene the actors need to be dressed at least a little differently. For this show, that's 11 outfits, each with multiple items. When you add the shadow cast that becomes 22 outfits! It's basically like trying to costume a large production.



Cheryl Sileikies & Glen Pinchin in *Trying*. Photo by Veda Maharaj.

Another challenge was limited inventory. Every costume designer dreams of having access to endless rows of costumes, but that is rarely the reality. You work with what you're given, so my focus was more on finding things that fit the actors and reflects the time period as much as possible.

I really love the banter between the characters, and that they both are willing to grow. What I hope the audience takes away from this play is that it's never too late to learn something new, that your perspective isn't the only one out there. People have different levels of experience and it's good to listen to one another and keep ourselves well rounded.

### Lighting Designer: Ken Hildebrandt

I generally approach the lighting design for a play the same way each time, by reading the script first. From it, I'll glean information about period, time, season, location, mood, atmosphere, the number and types of lighting cues, and if any practical lights are needed. I consider what light looks like indoors, outdoors and in specific time periods. This affects colour and angle choices. Sometimes I need to research specific lighting challenges such as what kind of light bulbs were used in a certain time period.



I also consider the set design and learn more about the colour palette the director and the rest of the designers have determined. Sitting in on rehearsals gives me a sense of where the actors are positioned on the stage, which helps me determine locations for spotlights or specific area lighting.

This is a character driven play in a single location so the lighting design is relatively straight forward. I can help augment the mood and atmosphere and make clear the time and season of the play by the intensity and colour of the light. The real challenge for a play like this is making sure I don't over-design and inadvertently draw attention to the lights with a lot of movement, abstract colours or patterns. This is a very intimate show, and the lighting should help the audience focus on the performances.

I love this play because we have two feisty, equally passionate, highly intelligent people 'trying' to understand and work with each other. It's fascinating to watch respect grow between the two characters through trial, error, and a sometimes tenuous commitment to each other. I love how this play takes place in the 1960s but speaks to universal human experiences: aging, learning to understand (and forgive) generational differences, wanting to make a difference in this world...the human experience can be 'trying', but it can be quite rewarding if you 'try'. See what I did there? I hope audiences are inspired, entertained and encouraged.

## Sound Designer: Josh Osborne

The sound design of a show is an opportunity to immerse the audience in the atmosphere of a particular show and to help create a stable groundwork of information that will help them receive the director's vision in a way that doesn't obstruct or distract from any other elements.

Through sound I'm able to convey, quickly and efficiently, information such as time and place as well as many emotional and modal indicators that create a dependable framework through which the rest of the show may be most effectively experienced. The pre-show music playlist, for example, is carefully curated to prepare an audience for the thematic and emotional content of the play, while also evoking a very clear time and place. My job, in this regard, is to make sure that when the show starts, the audience is prepped and knowing, perhaps even subconsciously, what they're about to be getting themselves into.

In many cases, the intent of the playwright in regards to the sound design is, unsurprisingly, obvious. Things such as an antique phone ringing, an incessant knock on the door, a distant siren, or the squeal of an over-boiling kettle, are all practical plot devices with obvious purposes. In these instances, most of



Cheryl Sileikies & Glen Pinchin in *Trying*. Photo by Veda Maharaj.



my work is already done for me. The challenge, then, is imagining ways to use sound creatively to elevate the show out of the realm of coarse practicality and into a space in which sound can more abstractly convey meaning. My experience with designing for *Trying* specifically has been of finding ways to give contextual, historical information and to draw attention to the more thematic elements present in the text that may be more difficult to express through other means such as blocking, costuming, or lighting. The music used in the show, for example, is all specifically and exclusively performed by two musicians, to convey the beauty in working together and finding a common voice.

There's a very visceral feeling of the effects of time in this show, I find, and an awareness of the ever-present cycle of young becoming old becoming young again, and the interplay between the two and how both may be either improved or alienated by the other, with the willingness to sacrifice one's effort being the deciding factor between the two. This was a feeling that stuck with me for some time after reading the show, and I hope it has the audience contemplating, on their departure, what they may be leaving behind.



Cheryl Sileikies & Glen Pinchin in *Trying*. Photo by Veda Maharaj.



## Discussion Questions: *Trying*

1. What makes Judge Biddle so irritable?
2. How do you respond to the reference to “Canadian civility?” Is this an accurate description of Canadians or is it a stereotype?
3. Sarah and Judge Biddle have a lengthy discussion about whether or not one’s heritage and education is as important as one’s ability to work hard and get a job done. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. Do you agree with Judge Biddle that “our language is deteriorating at the speed of light?” Why do you think he was so concerned with language?
5. How does Biddle’s wife, Katherine, influence both her husband and Sarah?
6. How does Sarah win the confidence of Judge Biddle?
7. How do Sarah’s personal challenges mirror those of Judge Biddle?
8. What is *your* favourite book title? What do their favourite book titles say about Sarah and Judge Biddle? (Sarah’s is “By Grand Central Station I sat Down and Wept” and Biddle’s is “All Passion Spent”)
9. Why is this play called “Trying”?



Cheryl Sileikies & Glen Pinchin in *Trying*. Photo by Veda Maharaj.