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## THE PLAY

The timing was perfect.

No one saw anything.

The two thieves, triumphant in their spoils, are almost in the clear-- until a 16-ounce rib steak falls out of **Alma's** dress.

Her partner in crime, **Phyllis**, declares that she doesn't know her. **Dom**, an over-zealous security guard, wants to bring the wrath of God down upon them both, while his world-weary partner **Otto** wonders who the real thief is.

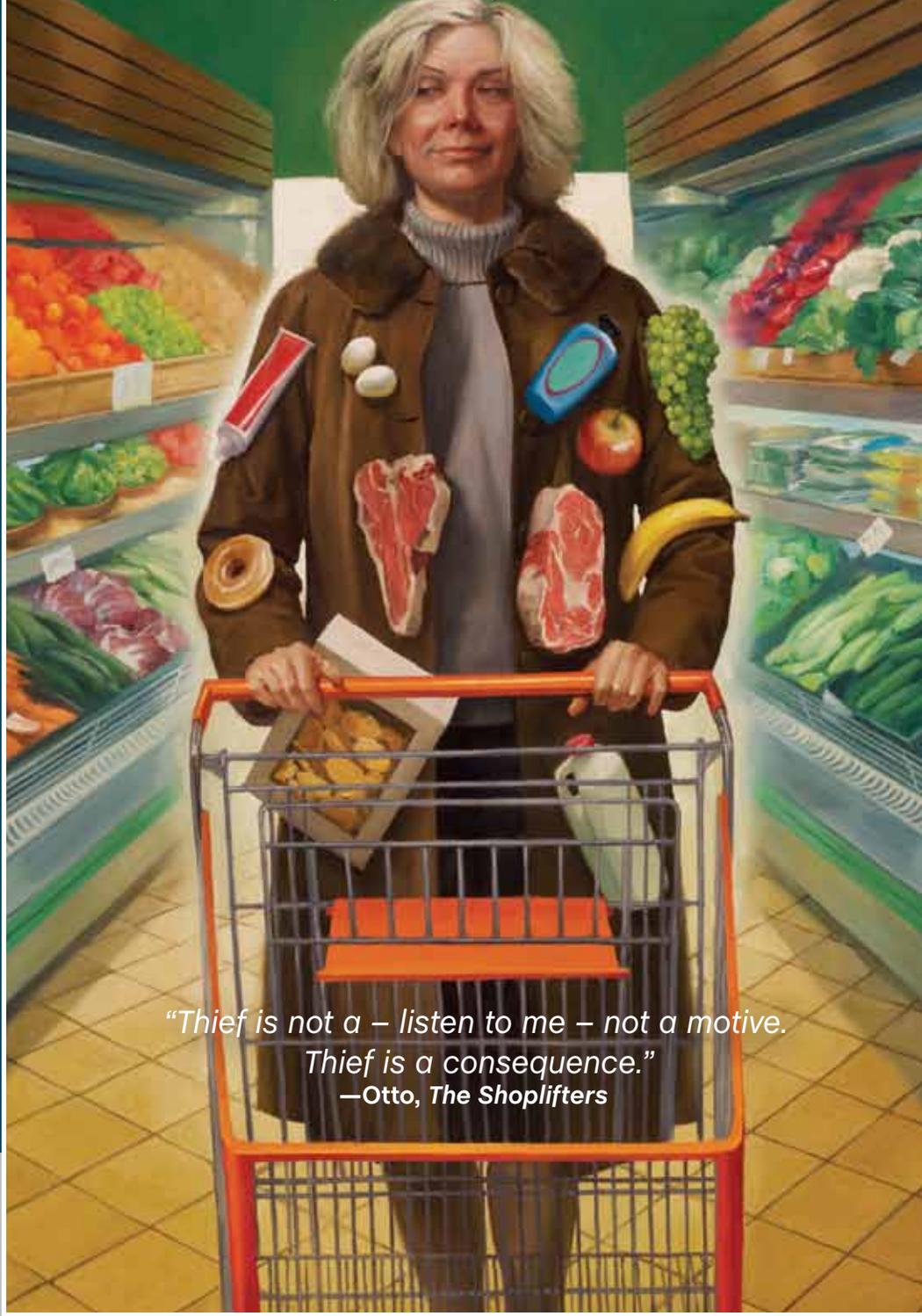
As the characters face-off against each other, a hard-fought battle of wills and wits emerges. But is *The Shoplifters* simply an interrogation of two thieves? Or are Alma, Phyllis, Otto and Dom getting at something deeper? To what degree are we all, in the words of the playwright, "stuck in a backroom, somewhere, trying to explain — if to nobody but ourselves — the reasons we act, either good or bad, and in spite of all the consequences?" ●

# THE SHOPLIFTERS

Now playing in the Kreeger Theater

September 5-October 19, 2014

Written and directed by Morris Panych



*"Thief is not a – listen to me – not a motive.  
Thief is a consequence."  
—Otto, The Shoplifters*

# MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



**Morris Panych**

*"I look for situations and people that occupy the smallest of spaces; their tragedy and their comedy enlarged by the almost complete insignificance of their acts."—Morris Panych*

Morris Panych was born in 1952 in Calgary, Canada and spent most of his childhood in Edmonton, Alberta. He studied radio and television arts at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology and creative writing at the University of British Columbia.

He launched his playwriting career with *Last Call—A Post Nuclear Cabaret* in 1982, which was later adapted for television by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. *Last Call* also marked the beginning of his collaboration with Ken MacDonald, his partner on and off stage, whose set designs have played a major role in many of Panych's plays. For example, MacDonald designed the set for Panych's *Vigil*, with dramatically slanted walls and windows obscured by brown paint.

Panych has twice received the **Governor General Literary Award for Drama**. He is also noted for his adaptations of foreign works such as Gogol's *The Overcoat*. His plays have been performed across Canada and around the world in more than two dozen languages. He has directed more than 90 productions in the U.S. and Canada. ●

**Governor General Literary Award for Drama** – Canada's highest honor for playwriting



## STAGING A WORLD PREMIERE

**Y**ou are about to see a world premiere: the first full production of

*The Shoplifters*. Robert Barry Fleming is the new director of artistic programming at Arena Stage. In this role, among many responsibilities, he helps plan the theater's season and put its artistic vision into action. He also works hand-in-hand with artists developing new work at Arena Stage.

**Thank you for speaking with us, Robert! *The Shoplifters* is a world premiere. Why is new work an important part of Arena's season?**

**RBF:** Contemporary playwrights are the chroniclers of our time, and their work creates a time capsule that reflects something about who we are and what we're about. That is an extraordinary and invaluable contribution to American and world culture, present and future.

**How does Arena select the new plays it chooses to produce?**

**RBF:** We read a lot of dramatic literature, see readings and workshops and toss ideas internally amongst the Arena Artistic Team. We then propose our leading titles to the Senior Staff and begin the multi-

layered work of sorting out what will be the right balance of plays for our primary stakeholders: Arena Stage audiences.

**What process has *The Shoplifters* gone through to be ready for its first full production?**

**RBF:** There was an early reading and have been a number of rewrites to hone in on what Morris Panych, playwright and director, really wanted to say in this piece. That process has continued through the current rehearsal period, augmented by the great insight of the stellar cast.

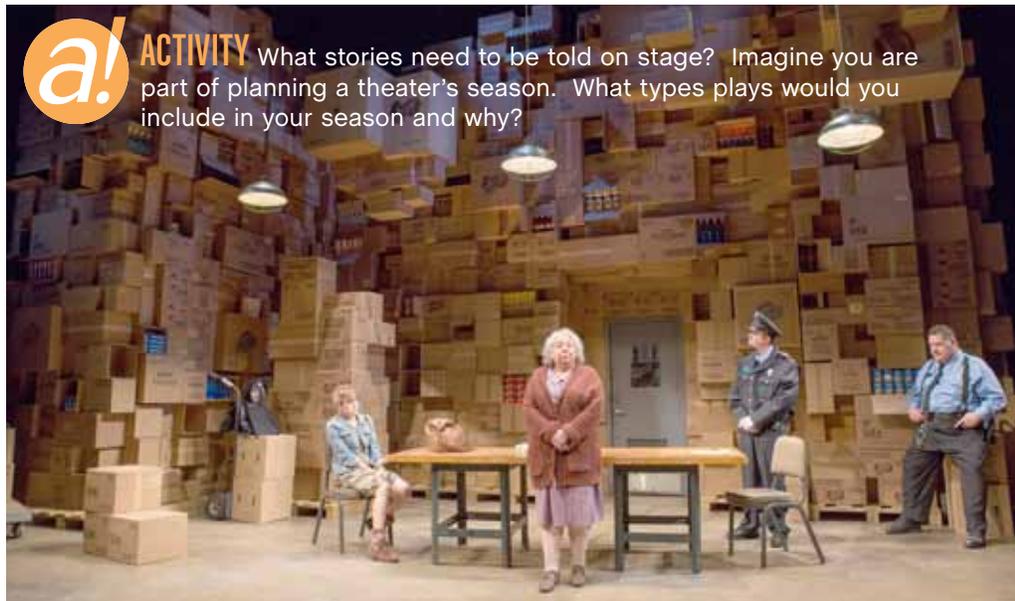
**What excites you about premiering *The Shoplifters*?**

**RBF:** It is inherently exciting to see a work of art come to life, but *The Shoplifters* has been particularly thrilling to see take shape. The range of the artists who are collaborating on the project here at Arena is so astoundingly rich. Some are distinguished and seasoned professionals, and others are new and inspired discoveries. The dynamic interplay between all of them working with Morris, at the top of their game on this project, is something of a marvel to witness. ●



### ACTIVITY

What stories need to be told on stage? Imagine you are part of planning a theater's season. What types of plays would you include in your season and why?



## FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTEBOOK

**P**laywright and director Morris Panych had the help of a dramaturg, Jocelyn Clarke, while developing *The Shoplifters*. When working on a new play, a dramaturg acts as an editor, sounding board and champion of new plays.

"The best kind of dramaturgy is like a good psychiatrist: not telling you about your life, but making you hear what you're already saying," Panych said in his remarks at the first rehearsal of the play. ●

# THE PRICE OF THE 5-FINGER DISCOUNT



According to the 2012 National Retail Security Survey, shoplifters stole \$14.6 billion in inventory from major American retailers in 2012. That's an average of \$14 million per day. The survey, conducted by Dr. Richard Hollinger of the University of Florida, reports the average value of each shoplifting case was \$113.30.

In Washington, D.C., shoplifting is a criminal offense punishable by a fine and/or up to 90 days in jail. It can also be prosecuted as theft, which has stiffer penalties. Adults and the parents of

juveniles found guilty of shoplifting are also held civilly responsible. According to the D.C. law, this means they have to pay the merchant three times the amount of the actual monetary losses associated with the shoplifting offense.

Shoplifting also has ramifications for us as a society. Consider the higher prices consumers pay to cover retailers' losses, the amount of police and court time spent prosecuting shoplifting cases, and the inconvenience and invasiveness of security measures in stores. ●



**ACTIVITY** What do you think you know about shoplifting, who shoplifts and why they do it? Write down your assumptions, and then compare them with the article "Five Myths About Shoplifting" by Rachel Shteir at [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

## SCENIC DESIGN

Ken MacDonald designed both the set and costumes for *The Shoplifters*. Carpenters in the Arena Stage scene shop built the set from 823 cardboard boxes of 22 different sizes.



**ACTIVITY** *The Shoplifters* takes place in the confined space of a crowded backroom. Draw a scenic design that creates a small space on a large stage. How could you make a place feel and look small? Think about the different elements of design you can use (lighting, sound, props, etc.).

# THE THEATER OF THE ABSURD

**T**he *Shoplifters*, like several of Panych's other plays, shows the influence of the Theater of the Absurd, an artistic and theatrical movement that emerged in the wake of the devastation of World War II. Absurdist artists argued that the universe was irrational and meaningless and that to search for meaning or order was an impossible task. Therefore, all human communication would eventually break down into silence.

The plays of Samuel Beckett are an excellent example of the Theater of the Absurd, especially his famous *Waiting for Godot*. In *Godot*, the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, are stuck in an irrational world, constantly waiting for a man named Godot, who never comes.

They declare that they're going to leave. And never move.

The Theater of the Absurd is also often marked by contradictory and sometimes nonsensical statements, pairs of characters, a lack of a traditional rising and falling action, and cyclical plots in which the end of the play mirrors the beginning with the repetition of dialogue or an important image. What Absurdist elements can you discover in *The Shoplifters*?

**a! ACTIVITY** Absurdist plays often begin and end with the same image. Write a dialogue or a short story that begins and ends with the same sentence. ●



- THREE BIG QUESTIONS**
1. Why do people steal?
  2. How do we know that a crime has been committed?
  3. What is a police officer or a security guard's responsibility, and who is it to?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### ON THE WEB

*This American Life*: "The Allure of Crime" (Episode 135)  
<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/135/allure-of-crime>

*The New York Times*: "Sticky Fingers, Male and Female"  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/opinion/sunday/equal-opportunity-crime-shoplifting-men-do-it-too.html>

National Association for Shoplifting Prevention: [www.shopliftingprevention.org](http://www.shopliftingprevention.org)

### BOOKS

*Trinkets* by Kirsten Tracy

*The Steal: A Cultural History of Shoplifting* by Rachel Shteir

### FILMS

*The Bling Ring*: A24, 2013.

### Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.  
Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

**Enjoy the show!**



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Arena Stage productions  
and educational opportunities.