This resource guide serves as an educational starting point to understanding and enjoying Dale Wasserman’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. With this in mind, please note that the interpretations of the theatrical work may differ from the original source content.
ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO’S NEST

Based on the novel by Ken Kesey
Adapted for the stage by Dale Wasserman

WINNER OF THE 2001 TONY AWARD FOR BEST REVIVAL OF A PLAY

WINNER OF THE OUTER CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD,
OUTSTANDING REVIVAL OF A PLAY

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**SYNOPSIS**

One of literature’s most unlikely heroes, Randle Patrick McMurphy, gets transferred from a prison to a mental institution. A small-time hoodlum, McMurphy assumes the move will be to a less restrictive environment. However, he does not anticipate Nurse Ratched, a tyrant who rules the psychiatric ward with an iron fist. This powerful drama explores human instinct when a society suppresses individuality and natural impulses.

**ADAPTATIONS**

Dale Wasserman’s play originally opened at the Cort Theatre in New York City on November 13, 1963, and it starred Kirk Douglas and Gene Wilder.

The play was revived Off-Broadway at the Mercer-Hansberry Theatre on March 23, 1971, and it starred William Devane and Danny DeVito.

The film adaptation was released by United Artists on November 19, 1975, and it starred Jack Nicholson and Louise Fletcher.

The play was revived on Broadway at the Royale Theatre on April 8, 2001 starring Gary Sinise and Amy Morton.
Considered to be a link between the beatniks of the 1950s and the hippies of the 1960s, Ken Kesey was born on September 17, 1935, in La Junta, Colorado. Kesey grew up in Springfield, Oregon, and he wrote his first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, in 1960 after completing a graduate fellowship at Stanford University. The novel was published two years later, and it received critical and commercial acclaim. In 1963, Kesey developed a collective of bohemian artists and literary figures known as *The Merry Pranksters*. In addition, he mentored and profoundly influenced the American rock band *The Grateful Dead* throughout their career. After 1965, Kesey taught at the University of Oregon where he continued to write. In doing so, he contributed works of fiction and reportage to such publications as *Esquire, Rolling Stone, Oui*, and *The Whole Earth Catalog*. After suffering a stroke in 1997, Ken Kesey died due to complications of surgery on November 10, 2001.
American playwright Dale Wasserman was born on November 2, 1914, in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. Since the age of 19, Wasserman worked in various aspects of the theatre. In doing so, he worked as stage manager and lighting designer with musical theatre impresario Sol Hurok. Shortly after that, he began directing musicals in Los Angeles. After becoming disillusioned with the writing quality of the musicals he directed, he left this occupation to become a playwright. He wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* in 1963 which ran extensively in such cities as San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, and New York. Based on his stage play *I, Don Quixote*, Wasserman wrote the book for the long-running musical *Man of La Mancha* in 1966. He later wrote two plays, *How I Saved the Whole Damn World* and *Boy on Blacktop Road*, that comprised the World Premiere of a 2006 evening of one-acts entitled, *Open Secrets*. In addition, he served as a founding member of The Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center, and he was the Artistic Director of the Midwest Playwrights Laboratory. Dale Wasserman died of heart failure on December 21, 2008, at his home in Arizona.
MAJOR THEMES IN ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO’S NEST

A QUESTIONING OF AUTHORITY

Although claiming that their actions are for the good of the patients, the authority figures in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* are shown either as threatening and terrifying, or as uncaring. Social issues in the late 1950s and early 1960s fueled the growth of a counterculture movement that encouraged people to avoid misguided appeals to authority. Once Randall P. McMurphy arrives to the mental ward, he questions the authority of the aides and the nurses in charge. In seeing him do this, the other patients begin to question the supervisors’ power.

SOCIETY’S DESTRUCTION OF NATURAL IMPULSES

In order to maintain control in the mental ward, Nurse Ratched doles out a series of punishments ranging from mild to severe. These punishments, along with the mechanical imagery used throughout the play to represent modern society, eventually lead to the repression of the patients’ natural impulses. Such repressions can hinder the ability to think critically and diminish the capacity for self-expression.

A FALSE DIAGNOSIS OF INSANITY

Throughout the play, the audience is encouraged to consider the value of the alternative states of perception, which some people may consider crazy. Chief Bromden’s hallucinations regarding the hidden machinery in the ward may seem insane, but they reveal his insight into the hospital’s insidious power over its patients.
The Inspiration for One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest

While studying creative writing at Stanford University in the late 1950s, Ken Kesey worked as a night shift orderly in a psychiatric ward. The facility was within the Menlo Park Veteran’s Hospital, and this job gave Kesey the opportunity to meet and talk with the patients there. Kesey did not believe these patients to be insane, but rather that society had pushed them out for not fitting the traditional ideas of how people were supposed to behave.

Today, the Menlo Park Division campus provides a broad range of Veteran services, including a National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This facility is Northern California’s primary referral site for Veterans who are elderly and may suffer from serious and chronic illnesses.

The Menlo Park Veteran’s Hospital,
Menlo Park, CA
A HISTORY OF MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITED STATES

As this play takes place in a small State mental hospital somewhere in the Southwestern United States, below is a brief history of the mental health care system in that part of the country:

1885-1905  Mental illness was recognized as the responsibility of each state in the 1870s. As such, institutions were built and mental health services became available.

1920-1935  Such facilities saw an increase in population during this time. As 24-hour care became necessary, some facilities built onsite dormitories for their nurses.

1940-1955  During this era, several facilities were scrutinized for their ignorance regarding mental health treatment.


1965-1980  The number of institutionalized mentally ill patients fell from its peak of 560,000 in the 1950s to 130,000 by the year 1980.

2000-Today  In place of institutionalized care, community-based mental health care was developed to include a range of treatment facilities, from community mental health centers and smaller supervised residential homes to community-based psychiatric teams.
HEY, TEACHERS!

Please review the following rules with your students to assure that all audience members enjoy the show!

1. Be on time by being in your seat 10 minutes before the performance is scheduled to begin. Latecomers will be seated at the discretion of the theatre and in locations chosen by the theatre.

2. Remain seated until intermission and until curtain calls are completed. If an emergency requires leaving your seat, please remain outside the theatre until allowed to return by the theatre’s staff.

3. Finish and/or discard all food and drinks before entering the theatre. Please be respectful of others by disposing your trash.

4. Silence or turn off all electronic devices, including cell phones, beepers, and watch alarms. You are encouraged to share your theatre experience via social media, but you must refrain from sharing or texting during the performance. The glow from all media is easily discernable in the dark theatre and is distracting to your neighbors and the actors.

5. Video and flash photography of live performances is not allowed. Actors will generally be available for photographs after the show.

6. Please refrain from talking during the performance.

7. Your courtesy is much appreciated as it allows for the ultimate experience of theatre productions for all our patrons.

Everett Collection, “Jack Nicholson in ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,’ 1975,” [Photo]


Kenton, T., “Amy Morton, Gary Sinise, and Ron O.J. Parson in ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,’” [Photo]


Sankowich/Golyn Productions, “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. 1971,” [Photo]

Shubert Theatre Archives, “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, 1963,” [Photo]

United States Department of Veteran Affairs, “Palo Alto VA Medical Center-Menlo Park,” [Photo]

