

Study Guide  
By Carson Davis



**Paint me  
this  
House  
of  
Love**

A COMEDY BY CHELSEA WOOLLEY

**BURNING  
C O A L  
T H E A T R E  
C O M P A N Y**

JAN. 30<sup>TH</sup> - FEB. 16<sup>TH</sup>, 2025  
THURS. FRI. AND SAT. AT 7:30PM  
SUN. AT 2:00PM

## Synopsis

Cecilia (Ci), a woman in her thirties, struggles to make sense of the return of her estranged father, Jules, who has been absent for 25 years. The story begins with their awkward reunion at Ci's house, a neglected property that she has been unable to maintain since her husband, Michael, left her. Jules, a self-proclaimed successful real estate developer, enters her life with a mix of enthusiasm, charm, and grand promises of renewal. Their dialogue is fragmented, reflecting the disjointed nature of their relationship as they try to navigate the overwhelming emotions tied to Jules's long absence.

Ci is simultaneously guarded and vulnerable. She yearns for an explanation for why Jules disappeared but struggles to articulate her feelings. Jules tries to smooth things over with optimism, suggesting they can fix her house together and rebuild their relationship. He recalls the letters they exchanged during his absence, claiming they were his way of staying connected, but Ci begins to suspect the sincerity of those memories. When Jules announces he has plans to leave town again for a cruise, it becomes clear that his presence is fleeting, further straining Ci's hopes for reconciliation. Yet, she invites him to stay longer, a hesitant gesture of wanting to salvage what they might still have.

Ci's relationship with her mother, Rhondi, is equally complicated. Rhondi is blunt, critical, and overly involved in Ci's life. She calls frequently, leaving rambling voicemails, and still treats Ci as if she needs constant guidance. Their interactions reveal layers of tension and bitterness, particularly as Rhondi dismisses Ci's heartbreak over Michael, a German man who stayed briefly at her house, had a romantic encounter with her, and then returned to his wife abroad. Rhondi frames Michael as another in a long line of "bad men" in Ci's life, drawing parallels between him and Jules.

Rhondi and Ci's conversations reveal a history of struggle and survival. Rhondi's abrasiveness stems from her own traumas, including being abandoned as a child and navigating a series of unstable marriages. She admits to fabricating parts of Ci's childhood narrative, such as exaggerating Jules's presence in their lives, to protect her daughter from the painful truth of his absence. Despite her harshness, Rhondi shows moments of care, like when Ci shaves her mother's legs—a tender, if begrudging, act of love.

As Jules stays with Ci, their relationship wavers between attempts at connection and resurfacing pain. Jules insists that his absence was not entirely his fault, hinting that Rhondi kept him away. He shares memories of their time together when Ci was a child,

recounting her imaginative letters and promises to build a castle where no one would want to leave. However, his recollections clash with Ci's reality. She begins to confront the fantasy she constructed around him, realizing that much of her longing was built on idealized notions of a father who wasn't truly there for her.

The play reaches a turning point when Ci learns from Rhondi that Jules never traveled to the far-off places he claimed in his letters. Instead, his replies came from a nearby P.O. box, shattering Ci's belief that he had been thinking of her while exploring the world. Rhondi, while harsh in her delivery, exposes this truth in an attempt to push Ci toward letting go of these damaging illusions.

Ci confronts Jules on this and promptly kicks him out of the house. It is revealed that Jules was sent by Rhondi in an attempt to get Ci out of love with Michael and to move on with her life. Jules returns back to Ci's house in shambles, with Ci alleging that Michael broke in. The play ends with Jules revealing to Ci the last memory he had of her before he left.

## Themes

- **Estrangement and Reconciliation:** The play examines how time and distance strain relationships, with a focus on how reconnection requires confronting painful truths.
- **Identity and Inheritance:** Ci's struggles reflect the impact of parental influence on personal identity, as well as the tension between rejecting and embracing that inheritance.
- **Illusions vs. Reality:** Both Jules and Rhondi present conflicting truths, forcing Ci to discern between fantasy and reality in her relationships.
- **Generational Trauma:** The play highlights how unresolved pain and coping mechanisms are passed down, influencing behaviors and relationships.

## Important Symbols

- **The House:** A metaphor for both stability and decay, representing the physical and emotional state of the characters' lives.
- **Paint:** Symbolizes renewal and the desire to cover up or transform pain into something new.
- **Letters:** Represent connection and the longing for love, as well as the gaps between what is said and what is true.

## About the Playwright



Chelsea Woolley is a playwright whose work includes: *Paint Me This House of Love* (Tarragon Theatre), *Enormity, Girl, and the Earthquake in Her Lungs* (Nightwood Theatre's Groundswell Festival), *Hey May Hey* (Forward March Festival), *The Mountain* (Geordie Theatre, Spinning Dot Theatre), *The Ugly Ones* (In participation with UNICEF Canada), and *These Peaceable Kingdoms* (New Words Festival). She is the creator of the Mixed-Arts Performance Partnership Program connecting young artists living in precarity to professional artistic mentorship. She was also the creator of a writer's unit for teens at Red Door Shelter where she and they co-wrote a script titled, *One Day*. Chelsea has been recognized through a number of awards including: Tarragon Theatre's RBC Emerging Playwright, The Playwright Guild of Canada's SureFire List, The Ellen Ross Stuart Opening Doors Award, and the Toronto Fringe New Play Contest. She has attended the Banff Playwright's Lab, and the National New Play Network's Playwright's Workshop at the Kennedy Centre in Washington DC. Chelsea is a graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada's Playwriting Program.

## Playwright's Notes

*(originally published in 2023 for the Taragon Theatre production)*

I read Pinter's *Betrayal* a lot when I started writing this play. Like a lot. Like during a first workshop of this script back in 2019, an actor said, "I'm not sure why, but I think this family is British," kind of a lot.

I love *Betrayal* because of what is written, but more so because of what isn't. There is a quiet yearning in that text. To me, it is a play about three people desperate for love, who just can't figure out the formula.

In 2018, as a fresh Torontonionian, I audited Richard Rose's directing class here at the Tarragon Theatre. I don't recall the play in discussion, but I remember Richard saying, "A parent becomes more present in their absence. When you lose a parent, you see ghosts." *House of Love* is about the after. If a parent is absent, but then returns, what happens to the ghosts?

And what were they made of to begin with?

Memories? Promises? Fantasies? Lies?

Much of this play is written in fragments. The words missing are the ghosts. They are Pinter's unsolvable formula. They are canyons in the way of reconnection. I really love words. And I have loved removing them for you in this play.

Lastly, any script takes time to grow. Thank you to: Courtney Ch'ng Lancaster, Shakura Dixon, Joanna Falck, Jessica Greenberg, Helen King, Myekah Payne, Karen Robinson, Tom Rooney, and Richard Rose for your care with seedling versions of this story.

And to you. I hope you enjoy the complicated and tender lives of this (not British) family.

- Chelsea Woolley

## Cast and Crew Bios

**Julianna Babcock** (Asst. to L.D). For Burning Coal Theatre: *Matilda Jr.* (L.D), *Haughey/Gregory*, *Copenhagen*. For the Raptor Repertory (L.D): *Radium Girls*, *Fourth Annual Raptor Revue*, *Little Women*. Julianna has a passion for all things theatre, especially lighting design. She looks forward to working with Burning Coal on their upcoming productions.

**Flora Bare** (Director)- Flora is a director, choreographer, performer and professor of theatre and circus arts with a focus on the collaborative process. She has her Master of Fine Arts degree in Physical Theatre from The London International School of Performing Arts. Flora is a former nine time All-American and National Champion collegiate gymnast and Cal Aggie Hall of Fame inductee from the University of California, Davis. She is a recent recipient of the Kennedy Center 2024 American College Theatre Festival Citizen Artist Award for her direction of *Ricochet*, with the Charlotte based company, Nouveau Sud. Flora moved from Chicago two years ago and is currently an adjunct professor at UNC Chapel Hill for the MFA Professional Acting Training Program. She last directed *Haughey/Gregory* by Colin Murphy at Burning Coal. You can read more about her work at: [florabarearts.com](http://florabarearts.com)

**Carson Davis** (Assistant Director) For UNCG theatre, *Into The Woods* (assistant director), *Mr. Benson* (writer and director). This is Carson's first show at Burning Coal and is currently an intern here at Burning Coal.

**Addison Florio** (Assistant Stage Manager/Assistant Sound Designer) is an early highschool graduate from SCORE Academy and will be attending Cape Fear Community College in pursuit of studying the arts and film. Addison is delighted to be joining Burning Coal's production of *Paint Me This House of Love* as an ASM and assistant sound designer. Addison has been involved in the arts from an early age beginning on stage with NC Theatre Conservatory's *Joseph and The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Addison has since continued her involvement in the arts and has expanded her work to stage management, production crew, design, and assistant directing. Works involve: Burning Coal's *Arcadia*, *Moonlight*, *Hymn*, *A little Night Music*, *KidsWrite 23/24*, *Copenhagen*, *The Rainmaker* etc. Addison applauds the cast and crew for their hard work and would like to thank the audience for their support.

**Beth Gargan** (Costume Designer). For Burning Coal Theatre: *The Rainmaker*, 2024 KidsWrite Festival, *Radio*, *A Home*, and *Arcadia*. For Justice Theater Project: *Matilda Jr.*, *26 Pebbles*, *12 Angry Jurors*, and *Annie Jr.*

**Ali Goins**. For Narrow Way Expressions: *UnbeliEVE* (Frank). For Black Poetry Theatre: *Inside Studio Real* (Bobby). For NC School of Science & Math: *A Raisin in the Sun*

(Walter Lee Younger). For NRACT: *Mahalia: A Gospel Musical* (Dr. Martin Luther King). For MaeKrisha Jones Productions: *Broken Chains* (Pastor Aaron). Ali is honored to bring his passion for storytelling and performance to every stage.

**Monica Hoh** (Cecilia). For Bulldog Ensemble Theater: *Redwood*. For NRACT: *Chicken and Biscuits*. For Odyssey Stage: *Ona, Something Beautiful*. For Redbird Theater Company: *Numbers are Down*. This is Monica's first production with Burning Coal stage and is thrilled to have this opportunity.

**Cori Ann Holder** (Assistant Stage Manager) is a Durham, NC native with a B.M. in Musical Theatre Performance from UNC Pembroke. She enjoyed her time performing at Jordan High School and UNCP and is thrilled to work her first show with Burning Coal! She has previously worked as the Stage Manger and Program Coordinator at Center Theater Company in Carrboro, NC. Love to her parents, brother, husband, and cats. Credits: Little Mermaid Jr. (SM), Beauty and the Beast Jr. (SM), Silent Sky (SM), and A Christmas Carol (ASM).

**Juan Isler** (Sound Designer) Juan is a native of Kinston, NC, grew up singing and earned a music business degree from Winston-Salem State University. He has worked as a technical director for a local news station, been a DJ in a local nightclub, and a choir director.

He has worked on more than 50 plays in venues across the Triangle and Triad of North Carolina. His success has been seen on all sides of a theatrical performance as an actor, technician, and director. He is a recipient of the Raleigh Arts Commission's Medal of Arts award and a current member of the Arts Commission. He is currently a Finance and Operations Specialist at NC State University.

**Astrid Paola Maldonado** (Assistant Stage Manager). Shows done for SFA Theater Department: *Dog Sees God, Ajax in Iraq, Our Town, The Wind in the Willows, The 39 steps*. For Theatre Suburbia: *Eliminating Alice*. Astrid is a university student from Katy, Texas and is currently an intern at Burning Coal Theater. She is very excited to be participating in her first show at Burning Coal Theater.

**Julie Oliver** (Rhondi) For Burning Coal Theatre: *The Life of Galileo, The Normal Heart, Peter Pan & Wendy* (also BorderLight Fringe Festival, Cleveland), *The Iron Curtain Trilogy* (also The Cockpit Theatre, London), *The Heretic*. For Theatre Raleigh: *Barbecue*. For South Stream Productions, *Twelfth Night, Seascape*. For Bulldog Ensemble Theater: *The Roommate*. For Curious Theatre Collective, *Creekside, Sally's Ride*. For Switchyard Theatre: *Fuddy Meers*. Also, *Mr. Burns* (Manbites Dog Theater), *The Cripple of Inishman, Superior Donuts* (Deep Dish Theatre) Julie is a retired middle school band director. She is afraid of nothing.

**Courtney Pisano** (Assistant Stage Manager) For Burning Coal Theatre: *Copenhagen, A Little Night Music, Hymn, Moonlight, Arcadia, Talley's Folly in London, The Life of Galileo, Art, Evita, A Hundred Words For Snow, Talley's Folly, Camelot, Oakwood Series (2019, 2018, 2017, 2016), KidsWright (2018, 2013, 2009), The Great Celestial Cow, Ashe in Johannesburg, The Weir, As You Like It, etc.* Courtney is a Burning Coal Company Member, and graduated from UNC Chapel Hill with a degree in Media Production – Go Heels! She would like to thank the bats who live in the bat boxes behind her shed for eating the mosquitoes.

**Meredith Riggan** (Scenic Charge Artist). Meredith is a North Carolina based artist and is excited to be returning to Burning Coal Theatre Company for the production of *Paint Me This House of Love*. This will be Meredith's 9th season painting for Burning Coal Theatre. After receiving her Bachelor's Degree in Scenic Art from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, Meredith has worked as the Scenic Charge Artist at several theatres around North Carolina including William Peace University, Half Pint Theatre, Sweet Tea Shakespeare, Triad Stage, City Arts-Greensboro Children's Theatre, The Winston Salem Theatre Alliance, ECU Loessin Playhouse, along with several freelance jobs such as painting for The International Festival and painting custom pet portraits.

**ColeTrain** (Shop Dog "Paint Assistant"). ColeTrain is excited to be apart of another production at Burning Coal Theatre. He has been “assisting” his Scenic Artist Mom in several theatres since he was 7 weeks old. He has no formal training in Scenic Art, but will retrieve a paint brush occasionally. He is great at supervising projects, looking cute, and tries to leave a paw print on every set. ColeTrain is a 10/10 good boy.

**Ethan Westmoreland** (Assitant Stage Manager) For Burning Coal Theatre: *Ex-Boyfriends, Oakwood Cemetary Series—Bring Them Home*. For Odyssey Stage: *Shinsei*. Ethan is ready to kick off an exciting new season with Burning Coal.

**Stephen Roy White** (Scene & Light Design) is a Midwest based designer and a teacher at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Design credits include *Arcadia* and *Silent Sky* at Burning Coal; *Chapatti, The Train Driver, Detective's Wife* and *Lobby Hero* at Milwaukee Chamber Theatre; *Zombies From the Beyond* at Skylight Music Theatre; *Trying, Talley's Folly, Murder For Two, Silent Sky, Wait Until Dark, Making God Laugh, Heroes, The 39 Steps, The Tin Woman, A Little Night Music* at Peninsula Players; National Veterans Theatre Festival at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre; and *Othello Deployed*, and *And Comes Safe Home* with Feast of Crispian – “Shakespeare With Veterans”. Chicago credits include productions at Northlight, Drury Lane, Organic, and a Joseph Jefferson nomination for *The Woman in Black*. [StephenRoyWhite.com](http://StephenRoyWhite.com)



**Wade Wood** (Stage Manager). For Theater in The Park: *A Christmas Carol* (ensemble), *39 Steps* (ASM), *Henry V* (SM), *Into The Woods* (ASM), *Harold and Maude* (ASM), *Sleepy Hollow* (ensemble). For Towne Players of Garner: *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* (Various), Various Youth Productions (SM), For Vixen Theater: *A Kid Like Jake* (SM).