

Theater

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How a play inspired the term 'gaslighting'

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Kathy Hsieh, as Bella Manningham, in a rehearsal of Sound Theatre Company's "Gaslight (Angel Street)." (Courtesy of Sound Theatre Company)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

The term "gaslighting" originated in the theater, so when Oxford Dictionaries named it a runner-up for word of the year in 2018, it got Teresa Thuman, Sound Theatre Company's

artistic director, thinking. If theater could introduce people to the concept in the first place, theater should be able to help people examine how gaslighting — in which people can be convinced to doubt what they perceive — came to play such an important role in contemporary politics.

Sound Theatre Company will present “Gaslight (Angel Street)” at 12th Avenue Arts April 23-May 14. The production marks the company’s return to live performances after a two-year disruption caused by the pandemic. It is also the starting point for an ongoing exploration of both the theatrical work and the broader concept of gaslighting. A film capture of “Gaslight” will be available for streaming for 10 days in June, followed by The Gaslight Project, a series of single events in July co-created with Washington Ensemble Theatre. The Gaslight Project is still under development, but will apply a contemporary lens to the themes and topics of Patrick Hamilton’s Victorian thriller.

After “Gaslight” premiered on the London stage in 1938, it became a Broadway hit in 1944 as “Angel Street.” In the same year, Ingrid Bergman starred in the Hollywood film, perhaps the best-known incarnation of the “Gaslight” story about Bella, whose husband Jack covers up his criminal activities by convincing her that she is insane. One of the ways he does this is by telling her that she has imagined lights in their home going dim when he has actually caused them to do so.

The technological basis for the term gaslighting is so antiquated that it requires explaining today: gas-powered light fixtures lose brightness when additional lights on the same gas line turn on. But Jack’s manipulative behavior is all too familiar to contemporary audiences.

“The term gaslighting came around from the play in terms of treatment of women,” said Thuman, who directs the play. “At this point I think it is more global — the kind of structural and systemic behaviors that can make people doubt their own sense of

what is true and obvious. Anyone who has experienced oppression and marginalization is told that it's their problem that they see something differently. It's true with climate change and it's true with our government systems and our financial system, things that we see very clearly and then we're given all kinds of reasons not to believe what we see.”

It is perhaps surprising that Hamilton, an educated white man in 20th-century England, would write one of the first feminist thrillers. Despite his own privilege, Hamilton was acutely aware of the rise of fascism during the interwar period. This informed his best-known works like “Gaslight” and the play that formed the basis for Hitchcock’s “Rope.”

“He was looking at how power was shifting in society and really writing about how people rationalize cruelty towards other people,” said Thuman. “Revisiting his plays, you know, they’re old and dusty in terms of style, but definitely there are some thematic things that feel very pertinent and worth examining. It’s really interesting how many times meaningful things have come up in terms of people’s relationship with truth and power.”

Sound Theatre has a history of interpreting classics through a contemporary lens (Thuman’s last project before the pandemic was “Peeling,” a postmodern take on Euripides’ “The Trojan Woman” through a disability lens). Thuman first considered producing “Gaslight” during the last presidential term, when there was so much conversation around gaslighting.

“From my perspective there was a sense we should look at this primary source and where this term is coming from in the 1930s and what does it mean now,” Thuman said. The pandemic enforced a two-year delay in its development, but when Sound Theatre began planning this season, “Gaslight” seemed as relevant as ever.

“It felt like the right time and space to explore this piece,” said Thuman. Through conversations with then-co-artistic director Jay Woods (who has since [joined the 5th Avenue Theatre](#)) and other involved artists, Thuman rejected producing a contemporary adaptation of the play.

“The piece itself lived very well in its original Victorian period setting, partly because of the issues of light and technology in the play that really are the crux of the action,” she said. Instead of making changes to the original text, Sound Theatre will continue

the conversation in summer with the two-week Gaslight Project in which contemporary artists will write new pieces in homage to the original, much as has been done for Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler."

One way this production will differ from the original is in diverse casting and a nearly all-woman design and production team. Rather than a response to the story's themes, it is consistent with Sound Theatre's mission and policy of radical inclusion.

"That's a standard thing for us," Thuman said. "We try to create opportunities for people to explore roles that they might not get from traditional casting. We also find opportunities for people to work on the fullness of production backstage and supporting other elements of production. It just helps everybody, and it helps the piece."

"Gaslight (Angel Street)"

April 23-May 14; 12th Avenue Arts, 1620 12th Ave., Seattle; masks and proof of vaccination required; \$5-\$75 sliding scale; 206-880-3947, [soundtheatrecompany.org](https://www.soundtheatrecompany.org)

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