

# THE SNOW GEESE

BY SHARR WHITE



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THE SNOW GEESE  
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THE SNOW GEESE was originally produced by Manhattan Theatre Club  
(Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director; Barry Grove, Executive Producer)  
and MCC Theater  
(Robert LuPone, Bernard Telsey, and William Cantler, Artistic Directors;  
Blake West, Executive Director)  
on October 1, 2013.

The play was developed by the Cape Cod Theatre Project.

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THE SNOW GEESE was originally produced by Manhattan Theatre Club (Lynne Meadow, Artistic Director; Barry Grove, Executive Producer) and MCC Theater (Robert LuPone, Bernard Telsey, and William Cantler, Artistic Directors; Blake West, Executive Producer) at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre in New York City, on October 1, 2013. It was directed by Daniel Sullivan; the set design was by John Lee Beatty; the costume design was by Jane Greenwood; the lighting design was by Japhy Weideman; the music and sound design were by Dan Moses Schreier; the projections were by Rocco DiSanti; and the production stage manager was James Fitzsimmons. The cast was as follows:

ELIZABETH GAESLING ..... Mary-Louise Parker  
ARNOLD GAESLING ..... Brian Cross  
DUNCAN GAESLING ..... Evan Jonigkeit  
CLARISSA HOHMANN..... Victoria Clark  
MAX HOHMANN..... Danny Burstein  
VIKTORYA GRYAZNOY..... Jessica Love  
THEODORE GAESLING ..... Christopher Innvar

## CHARACTERS

ELIZABETH GAESLING — Early forties. In mourning dress. A natural beauty. Perhaps because of her middle-class background, Elizabeth embodies a certain no-nonsense practicality, especially regarding her sons. She is protective of Duncan's need to live within the illusions of his upbringing; yet she is quite clear about (if not slightly resentful of) Arnold's seeming desire to bear the burdens of life. And although she knows that the world of privilege she married into must soon come to an end, she is determined to maintain an air of practical denial similar to that of an embattled chess-player: Faced with impending check-mate, she will to play the game to the end.

ARNOLD GAESLING — Eighteen, Elizabeth's younger son. Competent, pugilistic, earnest, and a bit bewildered by the world since the death of his father eight weeks ago, Arnie is a realist who has suddenly been forced to face the very adult burdens that have been ignored for years by the true adults around him. And yet because he is still a teenager, he simply hasn't been alive long enough to have perspective on his troubles, or to see where he fits into the world.

DUNCAN GAESLING — Twenty, Elizabeth's older son. Smart, good-natured, vain, and carefree, Duncan has the self-obsessed charm that people often have who are certain that events in the world will always go their way. And though his entire worldview has been built on the belief that he is a Golden Boy, the friends and connections he has begun collecting were acquired through a studied and disciplined exercise of social intuition.

CLARISSA HOHMANN — Mid-forties, Elizabeth's sister, living with the Gaesling family. Strict and principled yet ultimately kind, Clarissa's embrace of teetotaling Methodism began ten years ago with the death of her only daughter. Though she struggles against the vanity of preaching clean living to her husband and the Gaeslings, she often can't help herself; indeed, she sees her sister's financial emergency as a thrilling opportunity for everyone in the family to at last experience the joys of austerity.

MAX HOHMANN — Early fifties, German, Clarissa's husband, living with the Gaesling family. Kind, lovely, prone to both self-deprecating buffoonery and an earnest self-reflection that borders on loathing, Max often looks for dignity and goodness in a world that has seemed to turn against him: with the death of his daughter; with the transformation of his wife from carefree and youthful to austere; with the loss of his medical practice and home due to the violent anti-German sentiment of his neighbors. He is certain that he will persevere, though he asks every day what new trials will come.

VIKTORYA GRYAZNOY — Late twenties, Ukrainian; the Hohmanns' cook and maid. Born and raised into near-royalty in the Polish/Ukrainian city of Przemyśl, Viktorya has spent the last two years fleeing the turmoil of the Eastern Front. Almost desperately hard-working, Viktorya still retains — but barely — the bearing of her upbringing. As a true refugee from the Gilded Age, she embodies what everyone in the house fears most: the end of what they have always known.

THEODORE GAESLING — (Can be played by the actor playing Max.) A rakish late forties to mid-fifties; Elizabeth's husband; Duncan and Arnie's father. Every bit the Gilded Age American Victorian, Teddy was raised with all the material trappings of privilege. The inheritor of a Syracuse salt fortune (his grandfather drilled and operated brine wells near Syracuse in the mid-nineteenth century), Teddy's main goal in life was having a roaring good time — which he managed to achieve with devastating success.

## PLACE

A hunting lodge outside of  
Syracuse, New York.

## TIME

November 1, 1917.

## A NOTE ON SET, COSTUMES, AND ERA

This play has been called a period play. I prefer that it be thought of as a modern play set in a different period. Perhaps this is splitting hairs. I won't get into what role in current society each character in the play represents; I think that can be figured out. But what I will say is that it is essential that productions of this play not come across as overstuffed. This play is about us. Now. It's about the loss of a future that was supposed to be; one in whose absence we can sometimes find ourselves quietly adrift. Please imagine, when conceiving of a production, that this play has been produced hundreds of times *as* a period piece, and now, at last, it can be produced with a modern approach. Yes the period in which the play is set must still be evoked — it cannot be ignored that the year is 1917 — and yet we must be aware, when the lights rise at the end of the play, that one hundred years is nothing; and that the precipice at the end of one era is precisely the same as the precipice at the end of another. The only thing to have changed is the era.

# THE SNOW GEESE

## ACT ONE

### Scene 1

*Pre-dawn. A table full of food. A Victrola plays a silly, exotic, exuberant song (something like "Palesteena" by The Original Dixieland Jazz Band).*

*A young man dances onstage in Army trousers and puttees and a short robe of Asian influence. This is Duncan Gaesling, twenty. He dances the Grizzly Bear. Which is a very funny dance. He dances across the stage and disappears.*

*Viktorya Gryaznoy enters: alert, Ukrainian, aristocratic bearing, late twenties.*

VIKTORYA. (*Earnest: Ukrainian accent.*) Breakfast! (*Duncan dances back onstage. He dances the Grizzly Bear against Viktorya, who struggles very politely to deny him. She hurries offstage. Arnie Gaesling stumbles on, rubbing his eyes: eighteen, burdened. Spotting new prey, Duncan dances against Arnie.*)

ARNIE. (*Annoyed.*) ... Stop! (*Arnie breaks from Duncan and exits, pulling up his suspenders. Duncan follows him. Max Hohmann stumbles on, also pulling up suspenders: plump, German. He stops at the table. Surveys it.*)

MAX. (*Calls offstage hopefully.*) Sausage! (*He takes one and stumbles offstage. The music continues. Viktorya hurries back in, squinting in the light. She begins arranging plates. Elizabeth Gaesling enters, in mourning dress. Awake at this hour and, through*

sheer will, amused. She gives a quizzical look to Viktorya, who nods offstage.)

ELIZABETH. (*Calling off.*) Duncan? (*Elizabeth exits. Duncan reenters, ambushing Viktorya again, dancing the Grizzly around her again. Clarissa Hohmann enters and intercepts him: severe, self-proud. She grabs Duncan by the ear and pulls him toward the table.*)

CLARISSA. Sit! (*Duncan does. Clarissa inspects the table settings as Arnie stumbles back on. Duncan leaps up, Max and Elizabeth both reenter, and now everyone's here. Duncan dances the Grizzly dance at Arnie until his brother has no choice but to give in. He is reluctant at first and then lets himself go. They dance front-to-front and back-to-back, as a couple. The music ends.*)

DUNCAN and ARNIE. (*As one, with gusto, punctuating the end of the song: "claws" out.*) RRRRRRRR! (*Blackout.*)

## Scene 2

*Moments later. The Victrola plays something totally different: a soprano singing, perhaps Amelita Galli-Curci. They eat — Duncan, now fully dressed in his Army uniform, eats with gusto — while Viktorya serves, wipes, cleans. The following should be audibly, if casually, overlapped.*

ELIZABETH. (*Reading paper.*)

Good heavens. "Wood Alcohol  
Poisoning Kills Six."

MAX. (*German accent.*)

Terrible way to go. Just terrible.

DUNCAN. (*Reading paper.*)

So it looks like ... (*Chewing.*)

ELIZABETH. Duncan, you weren't drinking anything like that down in Spartanburg, were you?

... they're giving a benefit for the families of the *Antilles'* sinking at the Hippodrome and I'm going to miss it; band of one hundred twenty-five, and Houdini's doing tricks.



# THE SNOW GEESE

by Sharr White

4M, 3W (doubling, flexible casting)

With war raging abroad, newly widowed Elizabeth Gaesling gathers her family for their annual shooting party, to mark the opening of hunting season in rural upstate New York. But Elizabeth is forced to confront a new reality as her carefree eldest son comes to terms with his impending deployment overseas and her younger son discovers that the father they all revered left them deeply in debt. Together, the family must let go of the life they've always known.

*"In its setting and circumstances, a past-its-prime country lodge on the eve of epochal change, THE SNOW GEESE brings to mind Chekhov, as do its restless, anxious characters ... Mr. White deploys these figures in the interests of family [drama] and larger social commentary."*

—**The New York Times**

*"In The Other Place, White proved himself sensitive to the emotional attachment that people have always had to their beloved family homesteads, and THE SNOW GEESE speaks to that devotion."*

—**Variety**

*"THE SNOW GEESE imagines three women characters with psychological twists and folds of unusual richness and depth."*

—**Newsday**

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