

six degrees of separation john guare

six degrees of separation john guare is a phrase that refers to the acclaimed play written by John Guare, which explores the intriguing concept that everyone in the world is connected by no more than six social connections. This play, first performed in 1990, has had a significant cultural impact, inspiring discussions about social networks, human relationships, and the interconnectedness of society. The narrative revolves around characters whose lives intertwine through unexpected encounters, illustrating the theory of six degrees of separation in a dramatic and thought-provoking way. This article delves into the origins and themes of the play, its plot and characters, the impact it has had on theater and popular culture, and the broader sociological implications of the six degrees concept. Readers will gain a comprehensive understanding of John Guare's work and its continuing relevance in discussions about human connectivity.

- Background and Origins of Six Degrees of Separation
- Plot Summary and Main Characters
- Themes and Symbolism in John Guare's Play
- Critical Reception and Awards
- Impact on Popular Culture and Social Theory

Background and Origins of Six Degrees of Separation

The concept of six degrees of separation has its roots in social science and popular culture, but John Guare's play brought this idea to the forefront of theatrical art. The theory itself suggests that any two people on Earth are connected by, at most, six social links. This notion was popularized by a 1967 experiment conducted by psychologist Stanley Milgram, who demonstrated the surprisingly short chain of acquaintances needed to link random individuals. John Guare was inspired by this sociological theory and a real-life story about a con man who exploited wealthy New Yorkers' social circles, transforming these elements into a compelling stage narrative. The play premiered Off-Broadway in 1990 and quickly gained attention for its clever writing and insightful commentary on social class, identity, and human connection.

John Guare's Inspiration

John Guare drew from multiple sources for his play, including Milgram's experiment and the true story of David Hampton, a man who deceived New York socialites by pretending to be the son of actor Sidney Poitier. Guare's skillful dramatization of these influences created a work that is both entertaining and intellectually stimulating, capturing the complexities of social interaction.

The Sociological Basis

The six degrees theory is grounded in the idea that social networks are surprisingly small, despite the vast number of individuals worldwide. Guare's play uses this theory not only as a plot device but also as a framework to explore how people construct identity and trust within societal hierarchies.

Plot Summary and Main Characters

"Six Degrees of Separation" centers on the affluent Kittredge family in Manhattan and their encounter with a mysterious young man named Paul. Claiming to be the son of Sidney Poitier, Paul infiltrates their social circle, exposing the vulnerabilities and pretenses of their privileged world. The play unfolds through a series of interactions that reveal the characters' personal ambitions, insecurities, and the fragility of human connections.

Main Characters

- **Flan Kittredge:** A wealthy art dealer and patriarch of the family.
- **Ouisa Kittredge:** Flan's wife, an art patron with a keen intelligence and emotional depth.
- **Paul:** A charismatic con artist who claims to be connected to Sidney Poitier, whose presence disrupts the Kittredges' lives.
- **Rick:** Ouisa's brother, who has his own struggles and provides insight into the social dynamics at play.

Plot Development

The narrative explores Paul's manipulation of the Kittredges, leading to a mix of fascination and suspicion. As the story progresses, themes of deception, social mobility, and the search for meaning emerge, culminating in a dramatic examination of human connection and isolation.

Themes and Symbolism in John Guare's Play

The play is rich with themes that reflect on contemporary society's complexities, especially regarding social stratification and interpersonal relationships. Guare uses symbolism and recurring motifs to deepen the audience's understanding of the characters' psychological landscapes and societal commentary.

Social Class and Privilege

One of the central themes is the critique of upper-class privilege and the barriers it creates. The Kittredges' world is depicted as insulated and superficial, vulnerable to disruption by an outsider like Paul who exposes

their naiveté and desire for authenticity.

Identity and Deception

Paul's character embodies the fluidity of identity and the power of deception. The play questions how much of identity is performative and how individuals construct personas to navigate social expectations. This theme resonates with the broader concept of six degrees of separation, highlighting how connections can be both genuine and illusory.

Human Connection and Isolation

Despite the interconnectedness suggested by the title, the play portrays a paradox of isolation within social networks. The characters' interactions reveal a yearning for meaningful relationships amid the superficiality of their social milieu.

Critical Reception and Awards

"Six Degrees of Separation" received widespread acclaim for its innovative storytelling, sharp dialogue, and insightful social critique. Critics praised John Guare's ability to blend humor with serious themes, creating a play that is both entertaining and thought-provoking. The production garnered several prestigious awards, solidifying its place in modern American theater.

Major Awards

- Obie Award for Best Play (1990)
- Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play
- Outer Critics Circle Award

Revival and Adaptations

The play has been revived multiple times on Broadway and internationally, demonstrating its enduring appeal. Additionally, it was adapted into a feature film in 1993, starring Will Smith, which helped popularize the concept to a broader audience.

Impact on Popular Culture and Social Theory

John Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation" has had a lasting influence beyond the theater, shaping popular understanding of social networks and human interconnectedness. The phrase itself has become part of the cultural lexicon, often used to describe the surprisingly close links between individuals worldwide.

Influence on Social Networking

The play's themes presaged the rise of social media platforms, which operate on principles similar to the six degrees theory by connecting users through networks of friends and acquaintances. The work continues to be relevant in discussions about digital connectivity and the nature of relationships in the modern world.

Educational and Sociological Use

Academics and educators frequently reference the play when examining social structures, identity formation, and network theory. Its dramatization of sociological concepts aids in making complex ideas accessible and engaging for diverse audiences.

Key Contributions to Theater

Beyond its thematic significance, the play contributed to the evolution of contemporary American theater by blending realism with postmodern narrative techniques. Guare's inventive use of storytelling and character development has influenced playwrights and directors alike.

1. Exploration of social dynamics through engaging drama
2. Integration of social science concepts into theatrical narratives
3. Highlighting the fragility and complexity of human relationships
4. Popularizing a sociological theory through popular culture

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of John Guare's play 'Six Degrees of Separation'?

The central theme of 'Six Degrees of Separation' is the interconnectedness of people, emphasizing how everyone is linked by a short chain of acquaintances, and exploring issues of identity, deception, and social class.

Who inspired the character of Paul in John Guare's 'Six Degrees of Separation'?

The character of Paul is inspired by the real-life con artist David Hampton, who famously deceived wealthy New Yorkers by pretending to be the son of actor Sidney Poitier.

How does 'Six Degrees of Separation' reflect the concept of social interconnectedness?

'Six Degrees of Separation' reflects social interconnectedness by illustrating how a single individual can connect disparate lives and social circles, highlighting the idea that everyone in the world is separated by only six or fewer social connections.

What is the significance of the title 'Six Degrees of Separation' in John Guare's play?

The title signifies the theory that any two people on Earth are connected by at most six social connections, which is a key idea explored in the play as characters' lives intersect through unexpected links.

How was 'Six Degrees of Separation' received by critics upon its release?

Upon its release, 'Six Degrees of Separation' received critical acclaim for its clever writing, engaging plot, and thought-provoking themes, earning several awards and nominations including Tony Award nominations.

Has 'Six Degrees of Separation' been adapted into other media?

Yes, 'Six Degrees of Separation' was adapted into a film in 1993 starring Will Smith and Stockard Channing, which helped popularize the play's themes to a wider audience.

Additional Resources

- Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age* by Duncan J. Watts
This book explores the concept of six degrees of separation through the lens of network theory and social science. Duncan J. Watts delves into how individuals are connected in complex social networks and how information, influence, and diseases spread. It provides a scientific foundation to the idea popularized in John Guare's play, blending engaging storytelling with research.
- The Tenth Man* by John Guare
Another compelling play by John Guare, "The Tenth Man" explores themes of identity, deception, and fate. While not directly about social connections, it shares Guare's signature wit and examination of human relationships. The play delves into how personal histories and chance encounters shape our lives.
- Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* by Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler
This book investigates how our real-life social networks influence our behaviors, emotions, and health. It demonstrates that connections extend beyond immediate friends to friends of friends and beyond, echoing the six degrees concept. The authors use scientific research to explain the profound impact of social ties.

4. *Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia* by Frédéric Beigbeder

A novel that plays with the idea of interconnectedness and chance encounters in modern life. Beigbeder weaves a story about relationships, identity, and the invisible threads that link people. The narrative reflects on how our lives intersect in unexpected ways, reminiscent of the themes in Guare's work.

5. *Six Degrees of Separation* by Jon Krakauer

Though sharing the title, this nonfiction book by Krakauer focuses on the story of a young man and the broader theme of human connection in a different context. It examines the ways in which people seek meaning and connection in a fragmented world. The work complements Guare's play by exploring real-life dimensions of interconnectedness.

6. *Small World: An Academic Romance* by David Lodge

A humorous novel set in the world of academia, it highlights the interconnected lives of scholars traveling to an international conference. The book illustrates how social and professional networks overlap, creating a web of relationships that mirrors the six degrees idea. Lodge's witty prose captures the complexity of human connections.

7. *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* by Fritjof Capra

This book provides a systems theory perspective on interconnectedness in biological and social systems. Capra explores how all living organisms are part of a vast network of relationships. The themes resonate with the concept of six degrees, emphasizing the interdependence of life.

8. *The Social Animal* by Elliot Aronson

A classic in social psychology, this book examines how social influences shape human behavior. Aronson discusses conformity, persuasion, and group dynamics, shedding light on the powerful effects of social networks. The insights help explain the psychological underpinnings of the connections dramatized in Guare's play.

9. *Linked: How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life* by Albert-László Barabási

An exploration of network science, this book reveals the mathematical principles behind connections in various domains. Barabási discusses scale-free networks and the significance of hubs, providing a scientific background to the six degrees phenomenon. It offers readers a deep understanding of how interconnectedness shapes modern life.

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