

SKYLIGHT

by David Hare

Directed by William Brown

January 10 – February 10, 2013
at Court Theatre

STUDY GUIDE



About the Play

- **Characters:**

- Tom Sergeant, a wealthy restaurateur
- Kyra Hollis, a school teacher
- Edward Sergeant, Tom's son

- **Plot:**

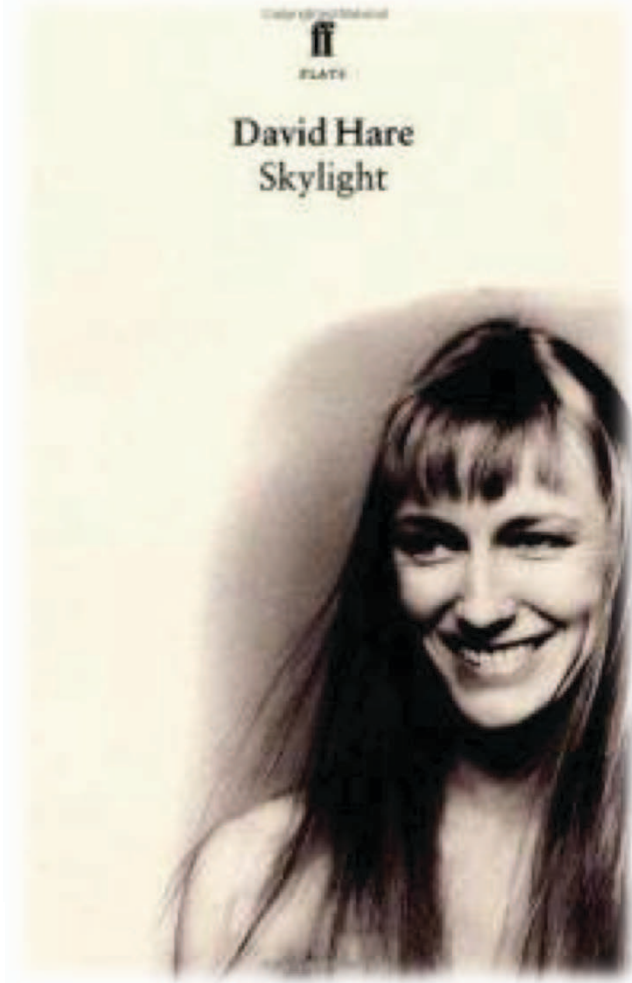
Skylight takes place in the apartment of East London school teacher Kyra Hollis, who one evening receives unexpected and seemingly unrelated visits from two men whom she used to know: Tom Sergeant, a wealthy restaurateur, and Edward Sergeant, his son. Kyra had been living with the Sergeant family years earlier, but left abruptly when her affair with Tom was discovered by Tom's wife, who has since died. When Edward shows up on Kyra's doorstep, he demands to know why she, who was like a sister to him, left him behind. Shortly thereafter, Tom appears, seemingly out of the blue; he pokes fun at Kyra's unglamorous lifestyle – characterized by a small, cramped apartment and a low-paying job as a public school teacher – to the point of insult, accusing her of punishing herself for her earlier indiscretions. Eventually, the discussion turns to their relationship, which will only be rekindled if they are able to face the emotional and social boundaries between them.

"Skylight started in my head with the powerful vision of an isolated young woman rubbing her mittened hands as her gas heater flared uselessly on a cold winter night on Kensal Green."

- David Hare on the initial image that inspired the play

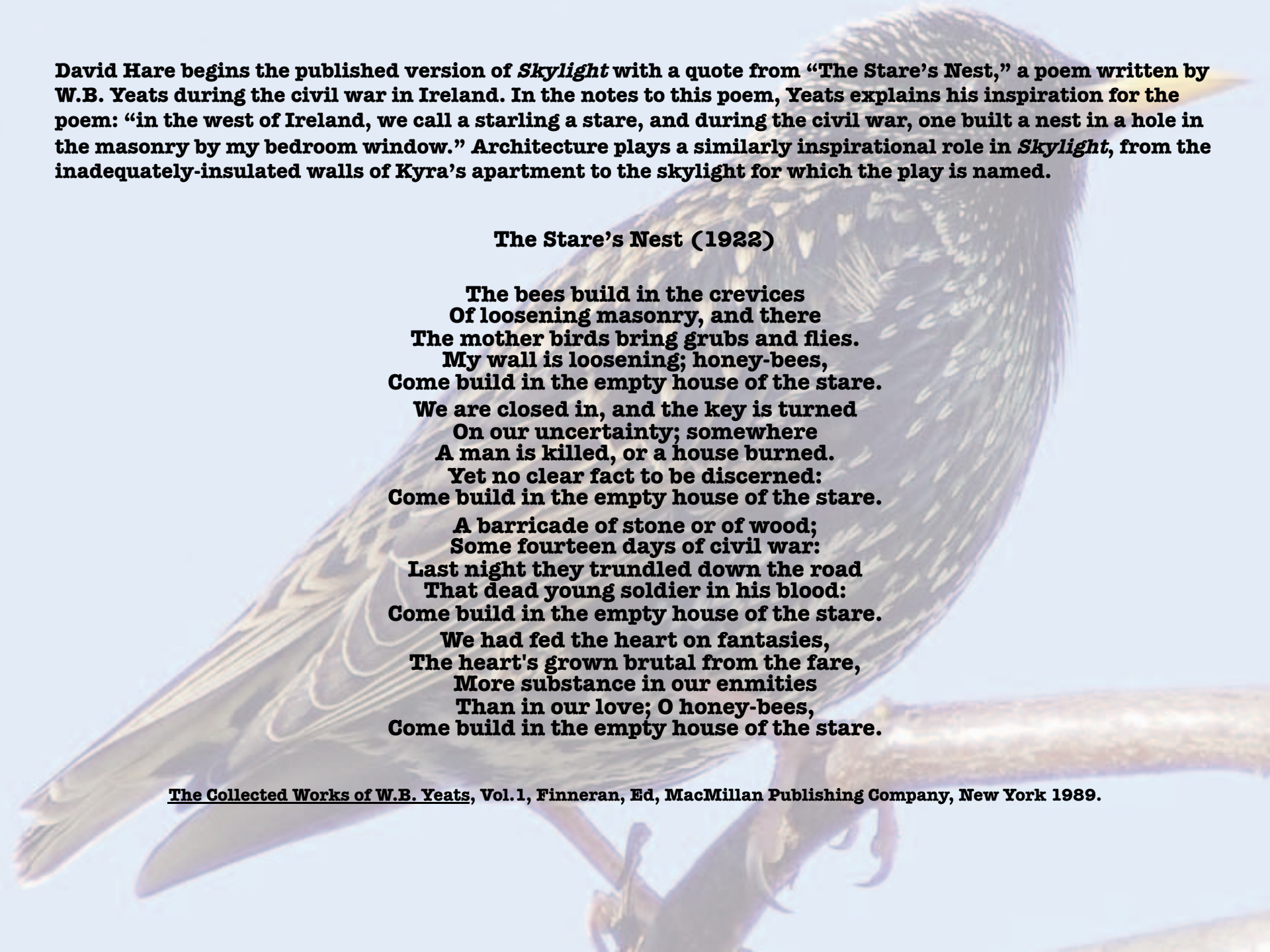
"In our slightly naïve way, all of us working on the production had imagined that an American audience would approach the play through an instinctive sympathy for its swashbuckling entrepreneur. Tom . . . was someone they would understand. But in performance we found that the social critique presented by the East End teacher and her contempt for capitalist excess was received with a silence, which made clear the nuances of the play were not passing anyone by."

- David Hare on the reception of *Skylight* in America.



Awards

1996 Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play
1997 Theatre World Special Award for Ensemble Performance
(Michael Gambon, Lia Williams and Christian Camargo)



David Hare begins the published version of *Skylight* with a quote from “The Stare’s Nest,” a poem written by W.B. Yeats during the civil war in Ireland. In the notes to this poem, Yeats explains his inspiration for the poem: “in the west of Ireland, we call a starling a stare, and during the civil war, one built a nest in a hole in the masonry by my bedroom window.” Architecture plays a similarly inspirational role in *Skylight*, from the inadequately-insulated walls of Kyra’s apartment to the skylight for which the play is named.

The Stare’s Nest (1922)

The bees build in the crevices
Of loosening masonry, and there
The mother birds bring grubs and flies.
My wall is loosening; honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.
We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned.
Yet no clear fact to be discerned:
Come build in the empty house of the stare.
A barricade of stone or of wood;
Some fourteen days of civil war:
Last night they trundled down the road
That dead young soldier in his blood:
Come build in the empty house of the stare.
We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare,
More substance in our enmities
Than in our love; O honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

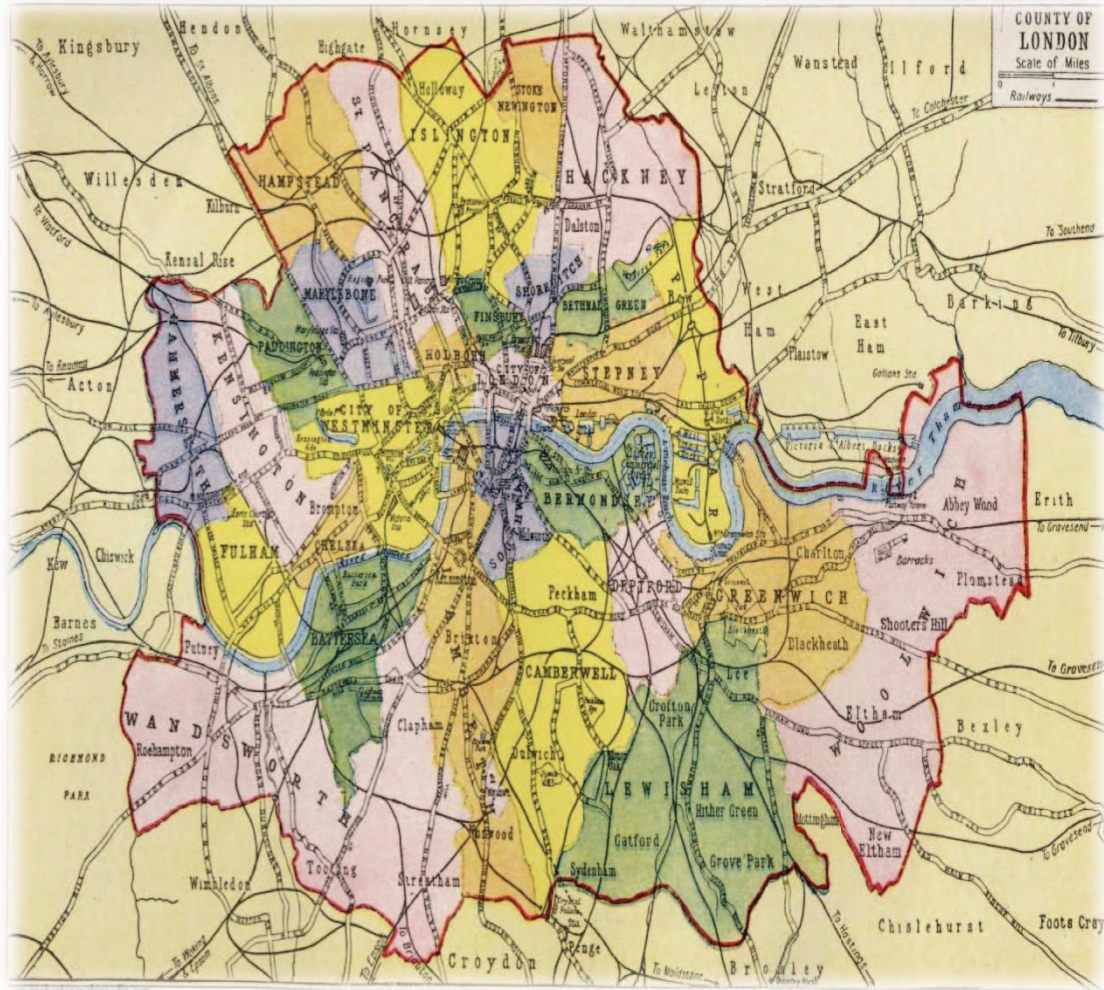
The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Vol.1, Finneran, Ed, MacMillan Publishing Company, New York 1989.

Neighborhoods of London

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A photograph of a street scene in Milan, Italy, showing the storefronts of 'La Senza' and 'Blazer' shops. The building is a multi-story brick structure with many windows. Two people are walking on the sidewalk in front of the shops, and a car is partially visible on the right.

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British Politics in the 1990's

Political viewpoints feature prominently in *Skylight*. Although the British political system includes liberal and conservative parties, it does not directly correlate to the Republican or Democratic parties in America.

Major British Political Parties

- **The Conservative Party (Tories)**

The Conservative Party, also known as the Tories, is England's right-leaning party (and the party of Margaret Thatcher, who allied herself closely with the politics of Ronald Reagan in the United States). Similar to the American Republican party, the Tory Party advocates privatization and a free-market economy.

- **The Liberal Party / Liberal Democrats**

Liberal Democrats are one of the other major political parties in England. In 1988, the Liberal Party merged with the Social Democratic Party to become the Liberal Democrats. Politically, it is "left of center."

- **The Labour Party**

The Labour Party was originally formed by a group of labor unions and socialist organizations that felt that the interests of the people were not being represented by the Liberal or Conservative (Tory) parties. The group initially called itself the Labour Representation Committee and focused on advocacy, rather than on politics; it worked closely with the Liberal Party until 1916, when the two split and Labour became a party in its own right. On the left politically, the Labour Party counts national health care as one of its most important legacies. When Tony Blair announced that "the class war is over. The 21st Century will not be about the battle between capitalism and socialism, but between the forces of progress and the forces of conservatism," he was endeavoring to distance the Labour Party from its roots and redefine it as a progressive party (or, as Blair described it, a "democratic socialist party").

The Political Landscape of *Skylight*

Skylight premiered in 1995 during what many consider the “hangover” period following Margaret Thatcher’s tenure as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. At the time of the play’s premiere, John Major was serving as Prime Minister, but his leadership was plagued by a series of seedy scandals within the Conservative Party (all of which paved the way for Tony Blair and the Labour Party’s subsequent rise to power).

Nevertheless, *Skylight* is colored by the prominent issues and politics of the Thatcher era, including her controversial poll tax, which took effect in 1990 and stipulated that local property taxes be calculated based on the number of adults living in a household rather than on the estimated value of the house. This effectively shifted the tax burden from the rich to the poor and exacerbated the already tense friction between the classes in Great Britain.



Margaret Thatcher, Conservative Party
Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
from 1979 – 1990 (the only woman to
hold the post)



John Major, Conservative Party
Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
from 1990 – 1997



Tony Blair, Labour Party
Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
from 1997 – 2007

Education in England

Partnership between the Department for Education and the Higher Education Funding Councils for England (HEFCE) to support the development of the Higher Education Sector. The Department for Education is responsible for the education system in England, while HEFCE is responsible for the higher education sector. The partnership aims to ensure that the higher education sector is able to meet the needs of the economy and society. The partnership also aims to ensure that the higher education sector is able to provide a high quality of education and research. The partnership is a key part of the government's strategy for the higher education sector.

"The Department for Education and HEFCE are committed to supporting the development of the higher education sector. We will continue to work closely with the sector to ensure that it is able to meet the needs of the economy and society. We will also continue to work closely with the sector to ensure that it is able to provide a high quality of education and research."

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About the Playwright



David Hare

The son of Clifford and Agnes Gilmour Hare, David Hare was born on June 5, 1947, in St. Leonard's, England. After graduating from Jesus College in Cambridge in 1968 with a Master of Arts degree in English, Hare went to work for the film company A.B. Pathe. Soon after, Hare co-founded the Portable Theatre Company, a touring experimental theatre group. While serving as the theatre's director from 1968 to 1971, Hare wrote his first plays.

In 1970, Hare won the Evening Standard Drama Award for most promising new playwright for *Slag*, his first major play. Two years later, after Portable Theatre declared bankruptcy, Hare became resident dramatist at Nottingham Playhouse. Hare also co-founded the Joint Stock Theatre Group and served as its director from 1975 to 1980. During these years Hare produced many more plays, including *The Great Exhibition*, *Brassneck*, and *Knuckle*, the first of Hare's plays to be produced in London's West End.

In addition to directing his own plays, Hare has directed such works as *The Party* by Trevor Griffiths, *Devil's Island* by Tony Bicat, and *King Lear*, with Anthony Hopkins in the title role. In 1982, Hare opened his own film company, Greenpoint Films. Among the screenplays written by Hare are *Plenty*, *Paris by Night*, and *Wetherby*, a story about repressed passions among members of the middle class.

Hare was married for 10 years to theatrical agent Margaret Mathieson, with whom he had three children: Joe, Darcy, and Lewis. Hare and Mathieson divorced in 1980, and Hare married designer Nicole Farhi in December 1992.

David Hare is the author of over a dozen plays, including *Via Dolorosa*, *The Judas Kiss*, and *Skylight*. He lives in London.



A skylight above the office of Hare's London home

Discussion and Follow-Up Questions

- David Hare is known for being a political playwright, but *Skylight* is both deeply personal and exceptionally political. Discuss Hare's metaphors, imagery, and themes as they relate to both the personal and the political.
- Why does Hare begin his published edition of *Skylight* with a W.B. Yeats poem? What themes in the poem appear in the play?
- What does the title, *Skylight*, represent in the context of the play? Why did Hare title it this way? (Note that no actual skylight appears on stage. What does this indicate about the meaning behind the title?)
- In his 1996 review of the West End production of *Skylight*, Ben Brantley (theater critic for *The New York Times*) said, "*Skylight* is the story of an unbridgeable gulf between two people – an idealistic, inner-city schoolteacher and the upscale restaurateur for whom she once worked – who, on one level, were made to be together." Do you agree that Tom and Kyra were "made to be together?" Why or why not?
- What similarities do you see between the themes of *Skylight* and recent political events (such as the 2012 presidential election or the CPS Teachers' Strike)? What can *Skylight* teach us about the current socio-political climate in America? Explain.
- What stands out to you most about the set of Court Theatre's production of *Skylight* (objects that are present, objects that are absent, etc.)? How does the setting of the play influence the action of the play itself?