



# THE LIFESPAN OF A FACT

BY JEREMY KAREKEN & DAVID MURRELL AND GORDON FARRELL

BASED ON THE BOOK BY JOHN D'AGATA AND JIM FINGAL

DIRECTED BY MEREDITH MCDONOUGH

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COSTUME DESIGNER Kathleen Geldard

LIGHTING DESIGNER Paul Toben

SOUND DESIGNER Christian Frederickson

PROJECTION DESIGNER Jerran Kowalski

FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER Paul Dennhardt

CASTING BY Pat McCorkle, CSA  
McCorkle Casting Ltd.

Katja Zarolinski, CSA  
McCorkle Casting Ltd.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Alexis Cabrera

STAGE MANAGER Tony Dearing

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER Dora Jane Trenbeath

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT Chloe Grotheer

## CAST

(in speaking order)

JOHN D'AGATA Brian Slaten

EMILY PENROSE Perri Gaffney

JIM FINGAL Griffin Osborne

## MAJOR SPONSORS

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*The Lifespan of a Fact* was originally produced on Broadway by Jeffrey Richards, Norman & Deanna Twain, Will Trice, Barbara H. Freitag, Suzanne Grant, Gold/Ross Productions, Jamie deRoy, Jennifer Manocherian, Barbara Manocherian, ManGol Productions, Carl Moellenberg/Wendy Federman, Ken Greiner, Van Kaplan, Dominick LaRuffa Jr., Marc David Levine, WitzEnd Productions, Eric Falkenstein/Moreland Mott, Caiola Productions, Rimmel T. Dickinson, & Jayne Baron Sherman.

*The Lifespan of a Fact* is presented by special arrangement with Dramatists Play Service, Inc., New York.



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**At The Rep, we know that life moves fast—okay, really fast. But we also know that some things are worth slowing down for. We believe that live theatre is one of those pit stops worth making and are excited that you are going to stop by for a show.**

To help make the most of your experience, we have put together a guide that will give you everything you need to know to get at the top of your theatergoing game—fast. You'll find character descriptions, a plot summary, biographical information, historical context, and other bits and pieces.

## **The Teacher's Lounge**

In an effort to make our educational materials accessible to students and easy for educators to incorporate into the classroom, our study guide is written in a student-oriented format. We hope that you will circulate this guide among your students in the weeks preceding your visit to The Rep, encouraging them to browse it before and after class and as time allows, using it as a launch point for both pre- and post-performance discussions. You may also want to visit our website, [www.repstl.org](http://www.repstl.org), for additional information including behind-the-scenes information. Any materials, either from this guide or from our website may be reproduced for use in the classroom. As always, we appreciate your making live theatre a part of your classroom experience and welcome your feedback and questions.

## **How to be the best audience ever!**

### **Take your seat**

An usher will seat your class as a group, and often we have a full house with no seats to spare, so be sure to stick with your school until you have been shown your section in the theatre.

### **Silence is Golden**

Before the performance begins, be sure to turn off your cell phone and watch alarms. If you need to talk or text during intermission, don't forget to click off before the show resumes.

### **Break Time**

This performance does not include an intermission, at which time you can visit the restrooms in the lobby.

### **Snack Time**

There is no food or drink permitted inside the theatre, so make sure you finish your snacks in the lobby before you enter the house.

### **Now Hear This**

Just as you can see and hear the actors, they can see and hear you. Any talking, even whispering, can be heard by those around you and those onstage, so please wait until the show is over to chat.

### **No Paparazzi Please**

The theatre is a camera-free zone. Flash photography interrupts the action onstage and is prohibited by Actors' Equity Association rules. You can sneak a peek at production photos on The Rep's website at [repstl.org](http://repstl.org).

### **Take a Bow**

Let the actors know you respect their work by responding to the curtain call at the end of the performance. Show your appreciation for a job well done through applause.

## **THANKS FOR BEING A GREAT AUDIENCE!**

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## **Rep Education Department**

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Marsha Coplon

**Associate Director of Education**

Sarah Brandt

**Education Programs Associate**

Brian Coats





Brian Slaten, Perri Gaffney and Griffin Osborne. Photo by Phillip Hamer.

## Vocab

**Joint concentrator:** the combined pursuit in which a student develops a program that integrates two fields in a coherent plan of study

**Good-faith effort:** an action made without any malice or desire to defraud others, almost like a purely-motivated action

**Roughshod:** in a roughly forceful manner; not at all delicate

**Beholden:** owing thanks or having a duty to someone in return for help or a service

**Diphthong:** a sound formed by the combination of two vowels in a single syllable, in which the sound begins as one vowel and moves towards another (examples: coin, loud, side)

## Characters

As the Editor-in-Chief of a large, high-end magazine, **Emily Penrose** is a level-headed, no-nonsense mediator in pursuit of a former glory.

**Jim Fingal** is an fresh-faced young intern at Emily's company who strives to make an impression that will hopefully lead to a long, successful career.

**John D'Agata**, a notable essayist, is a man of deep convictions who believes in the power of his work and the importance of a writer's integrity

**Informatics:** information science, or the science of processing data for storage and retrieval

**Doorjamb:** the side-post or lining of a doorway; the vertical part of a door frame onto which the door is secured

**Transient:** lasting only for a short time

**Confluence:** a process or act of merging or gathering at one point

**Antiquity:** ancient times

**Dilettante:** a dabbler or amateur; someone who pursues an area of interest, often the arts, without real commitment or knowledge



## Summary

### WARNING: SPOILERS AHEAD



Griffin Osborne and Perri Gaffney. Photo by Phillip Hamer.



Griffin Osborne and Brian Slaten. Photo by Phillip Hamer.

At the top of the play, Emily Penrose, the Editor-in-Chief of a high-end magazine, makes the last-minute decision to bump the cover story of her next issue in favor of an essay written by John D'Agata detailing the suicide of a teenage boy in Las Vegas. To Emily, the essay is both timely and a possible chance at redemption for her struggling magazine.

With the quick turnaround, Emily seeks out an energetic and competent fact-checker to review the article over the course of several days to ready it for publication. Jim Fingal, a young intern working for the company, volunteers. After a quick meeting with Emily regarding the weight of the task ahead of him, Jim gets to work.

However, Emily soon realizes that she is in way over her head. What she had assumed was a straightforward task becomes incredibly complex under Fingal's microscopic view, which has him checking every single possible fact in each and every line of the article. Feeling burdened, Emily sends Jim off to email with the author himself, John D'Agata.

Jim and John's initial email correspondence does not go very well. Jim, while trying to behave as professionally as possible, keeps sticking his foot in his mouth and John, a reputable essayist, has little interest in being fact-checked. They make little headway on the article, and Jim finds himself back in Emily's office, frustrated and ready to give in. Emily refuses to accept his resignation.

Two days later, on a Sunday morning (and only one day before the deadline for the piece), John D'Agata finds Jim Fingal on his doorstep in Las Vegas, Nevada. Tired of not getting any answers to his questions, Jim made the decision to visit John while in town for a wedding party. John is enraged and calls Emily, who decides to fly to Las Vegas as soon as possible.

Later that day, the three find themselves at John's house, unable to come to a consensus about what to do with the essay. Jim refuses to fold on his factual research, John refuses to fold on his creative integrity, and Emily struggles to play the mediator. The play ends with the production facility calling, awaiting a decision to go to print.

## Between the Lines

### Fact vs. Fiction

While *The Lifespan of a Fact* is a fairly straightforward play about one man editing another man's work, it opens up a thought-provoking conversation about fact, fiction, and the importance of one in relation to the other. In a way, Jim and John represent both of these ideas: Jim is fact, focused on the truth and the evidence of that truth, while John is fiction. However, this doesn't mean that John writes without truth; more accurately, John is more willing to think and write through a creative lens, even if that means foregoing absolute fact in favor of artistic style. For Jim, this is inexcusable, especially when the essay in question details a real event. The entire play details this battle of opinions without giving easy answers to which side is ultimately correct. **As you watch the play, listen carefully to the arguments that Jim and John make. In the end, do you feel that one is right? Which side did you take, and why? Find someone in your class who developed a different opinion and discuss your reactions.**

### Journalistic Responsibility and Trust

*The Lifespan of a Fact* presents an engaging and important conversation about the responsibility of publications to present the truth to their readers. Depending on the magazine or newspaper, readers may seek out a specific piece with the understanding that what they are reading is factual. When speaking to John, Emily very clearly states that at the end of it all, "it comes down to trust." Emily's magazine is held to journalistic standards, and therefore has a duty to tell the truth; that is the reputation and trust that has been placed on and in the magazine and the work it publishes. This is in exact opposition to John's modus operandi: he clearly states to Emily that she should stop treating him like a journalist because he is an essayist and that, like many essayists before him, he is not held to journalistic standards or the truth. Their conflict seems almost insurmountable. **After seeing the play, discuss these two differing worldviews. Do you feel that, in the case of this essay, John has a duty to tell the truth? How do you see Emily and John coming to an agreement? Place yourself in their positions: how would you solve this issue?**

### Big Picture vs. Minor Details

When you have a small cast of characters like the one in this play, it becomes inevitable that they will each come in conflict with one another. Previously, we've discussed the conflict between John and Jim, and the conflict between John and Emily. However, Jim is also in conflict with Emily throughout the play. When she assigns him to this task, Emily believes that Jim will quickly check the article, that it will be a simple process. This is, obviously, not what happens. Instead, Jim gets lost in the incredibly minor details—in fact, every single minor detail—and continues to get stuck without answers. When he goes to Emily, she does not share his concerns. Emily is too caught up in the big picture, and in what this particular essay will do for her magazine and for her career. She cannot be truly bothered by Jim's concerns if they actively work against her goals and desires; she can let the details and small concerns go, as long as the essay remains as important as she feels it is. **Like the conflicts before, pay close attention to these ideas as you watch the play. Discuss your reactions and thoughts with a classmate whose opinion differs from your own.**

This play is full of big ideas and unanswered questions that will have you talking for a long time after the bows. Use these as a starting point to discuss the ideas, but bring your own ideas and observations into the conversation as well. This by no means covers everything in the play, and you might find that others in your class share your thoughts or feel very differently. Either way, it makes for great conversation!

## Context: The World of Publishing

While you don't have to look too hard to find claims that print publishing is a dying industry, the fact of the matter is that, while popular attention has shifted to more digital consumption, printed publications are still very much alive. Certainly, many magazines and newspapers that once only existed as a printed source have moved over to digital publications as well, but not at the complete expense of their printed counterparts. Respected institutions like *The New York Times* or *Time Magazine* may have thriving websites that help them to share their news on social media and the Internet, but their printed editions are still widely sought out around the world.

So, how does the world of print publishing work, and what goes into the creation of a magazine like *Time* or *The New Yorker*? *The Lifespan of a Fact* gives us a really dynamic (and dramatic) way of how it all happens, but there are many more moving parts than just three people reviewing an article in time for publication.

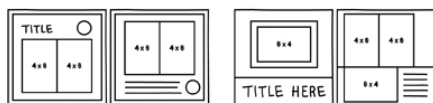
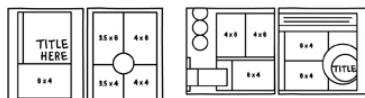
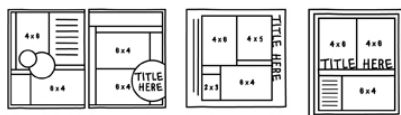
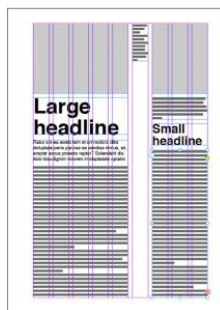
Depending on the specific magazine and its target audience, a publication could have many different types of content. Certainly, all magazines have advertisements. It is implied in the play that Emily's magazine once was filled with hard-hitting pieces of journalism, but now it caters more towards high-end advertisements and small articles about jewelry and fashion. Magazines can choose to have a mixture of quality in their content, as long as they are mindful of their audience and investors.



## What Goes in a Magazine?

Each publication has a spread or layout, which details how the pages are distributed—many will go to ads, but a fair number will go to written material. Again, these might be articles about fashion or jewelry, maybe a section dedicated to recipes or advice columns. Then come the features: these articles or essays are lengthier and more in-depth. Each magazine will have a cover feature, which is the subject of *The Lifespan of a Fact*.

Features can be a variety of different works, all depending on the magazine. They could be celebrity exposes, or they could be in-depth explorations of current events. This work can also be from a variety of sources: it can be commissioned, meaning the publisher pays for an author or essayist to write a specific piece for the magazine, or it can be bought from an author or essayist — we get a sense that this is the situation in *The Lifespan of a Fact*. John D'Agata seems to have written something out of his own interest and then submitted it to Emily Penrose for publication.

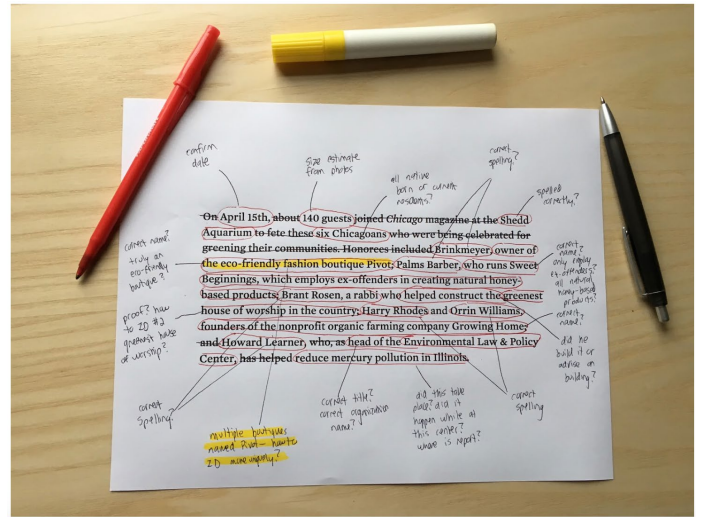




## Context: The World of Publishing

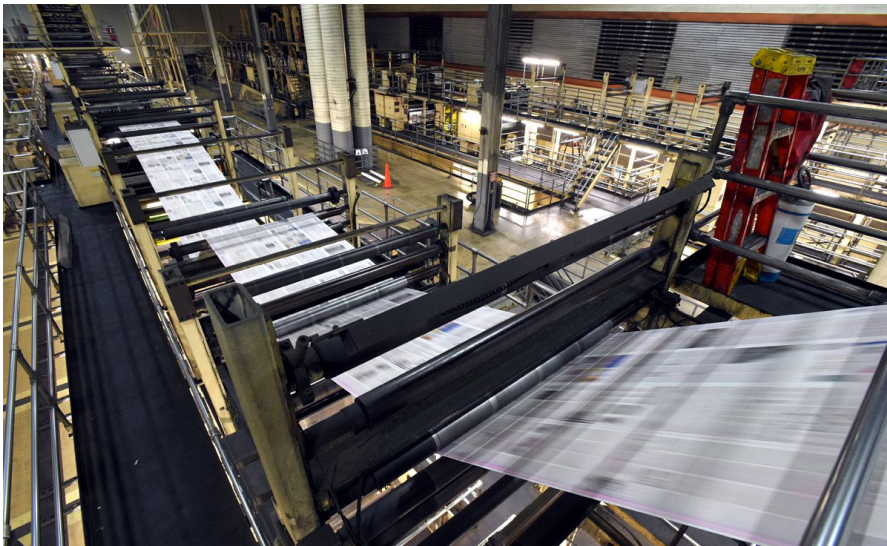
## Putting It Together

Once everything has been gathered for the issue — the advertisements have been submitted or created and the copy/text has been turned in — the copy editors have to work to finalize everything for publication. This is the stage that we see highlighted in the play. Copy editors and fact-checkers will comb through the piece, not just to fix grammar, but to fully edit the piece. Just like authors go through a rigorous editing stage while publishing their novels, so too do journalists and essayists. Since many of these writers are writing about true events, their work also goes through a fact-check, just to ensure that everything lines up correctly. Magazines can find themselves in the middle of lawsuits if they publish false information — that's why Jim Fingal is so focused and detail-oriented during the play; there's a lot riding on him doing his job well!



## Publishing

Once everything has been finalized by the editors and editor-in-chief, the draft goes to the printer. Often, this is an outside company that has been hired to do the heavy printing. The printer will create a proof, or a mock-up of what the issue will look like. This gets sent back to the editor-in-chief for review. Everything is looked over: image coloring, resolution, and, oftentimes, another quick check of the text and other content. Once the proof is okayed, the issue is printed and distributed.



The *Lifespan of a Fact* takes us through a very dramatic staging of the editing phase of publishing, but this is work that people do every day on a wide variety of content. Part of the excitement of the play is that it ends before the issue is published, so it's a little unclear about how it all pans out. Certainly by reading the real-life events that inspired this play in this guide, you'll get an idea of what happened, but since so much goes into publishing, it's impossible to get all the facts to this story.

## Biographical Information: John D'Agata and Jim Fingal

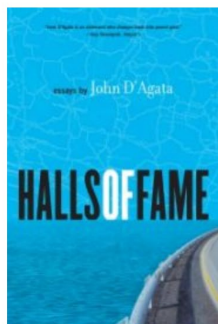
While *The Lifespan of a Fact* dramatically explores an intense three-day editing process between John D'Agata and Jim Fingal over D'Agata's essay "What Happens There," the reality of their relationship is quite different.



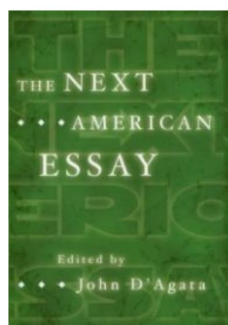
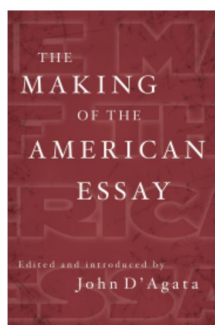
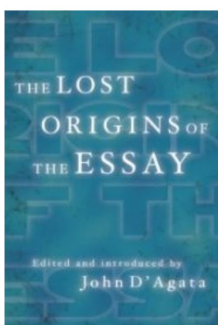
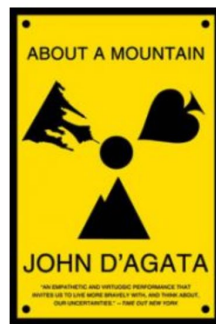
**Fact:** It took Jim Fingal seven years to fact-check D'Agata's fifteen-page essay on the suicide of Levi Presley. The process was completed mostly through a back-and-forth email conversation covering nearly every line of the essay. In 2012, they published a book called *The Lifespan of a Fact* with their communications regarding the article.

**Fact:** John D'Agata is a notable American essayist. Born in Massachusetts in 1975, D'Agata has written six books of nonfiction, most detailing his work as an essayist and the history of the American essay. *The Next American Essay*, *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, and *The Making of the American Essay* all make up the "A New History of the Essay" anthology trilogy. D'Agata is a professor in the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa, one of the nation's top creative writing institutions.

**Fact:** Jim Fingal's website ([jimfingal.com](http://jimfingal.com)) self-describes the fact-checker as "a hacker and writer living in SF." After obtaining an English degree from Harvard University, Fingal took a job as an intern with McSweeney's/The Believer in the San Francisco area—The Believer would go on to publish D'Agata's essay "What Happens There." He is currently a lead developer for Amino, a company that provides in-depth and useful information about healthcare to its clients.



**The Lifespan  
of a Fact.**  
**John D'Agata,  
author.**  
**Jim Fingal,  
fact-checker.**





## In Real Life: Fact-Checking 101

We are currently living in a time where we are oversaturated by news. It is everywhere, and it is impossible to avoid. News appears in print and on the radio. The news is available on social media and easily accessible through news outlet websites. More than likely, you will see something that is deemed “newsworthy” multiple times a day, from a variety of sources. With all of this information coming in from a variety of sources, it is the job of the reader to sort through everything to find the truth. You have to become the ultimate fact-checker, just like Jim Fingal.

Now, that’s not to say that you have to pick apart every single minute detail of every single thing that you read — there are Jim Fingals in the world who will do that, and enjoy doing that (and hey, that may be you), and those people are hired by publishers all over the world to do the intense fact-checking. However, it is important for you to do your own due diligence when it comes to taking in new information and processing it. You have to do your own search for the truth.



Griffin Osborne. Photo by Phillip Hamer.

**So, how can you do that when you have so many other things to do?** There isn’t necessarily a right or wrong way to go about it, but there are some simple reminders that you can use to help you navigate your way to the facts.

1. Don’t believe everything you read: This one seems like a no-brainer, but it might not be as obvious as you think. With articles popping up everywhere all the time, it’s easy to get confused by what is the truth. Headlines can be very enticing, but they don’t give the whole story, so it’s important to read the accompanying article. Then, you have to ask yourself some questions about it: Who wrote it? Do you know of them? What are their sources? Could it be satire? What other articles have been published on the site or in the magazine? After you ask the questions, try to verify the information from at least one other source — if you can only find one thing about it, it might not be entirely truthful.
2. Find your trusted sources: The more you read and the more you know, the easier this step becomes. Find the news outlets that you trust, that you’ve confirmed gives honest information, and follow them so that their articles show up as part of your news cycle. Have a lot of different sources, so that you can easily compare them. Take some time to do research about their contributors and staff, so that you can kind of get to know them and what they’re interested in. It’s easier to trust someone that you know a little bit.
3. Fact-check: At the end of the day, you can just look up information that you’re unfamiliar with, or news that might not seem the most truthful. You don’t need to create a complex algorithm like Jim Fingal to do it — an internet search will do just fine. However, you have to put in some time. You have to read multiple sources, and they have to be sources with merit. Someone’s personal blog won’t tell you the same information as a reputable news magazine.
4. Ask questions: Finally, just talk to the people around you. Ask questions, share ideas, fact-check your friends. It’s easier to get to the truth when there are multiple people looking for it.