

Educational Material for the play *Same Shit, Different Planet*

- a play by Fergal O'Byrne

How to use the educational material:

- If you are just going to *see* the play, you can work on part 1 and part 3.
- If you are going to *study* the play in detail, the assignments in part 2 will be relevant as well. Here it is possible to analyse different scenes from the play.
- If you have questions or comments, you are welcome to contact us.
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Introduction

About the play

It is over 200 years in the future. Humans have colonised Mars. However, there is tension between the enormous Trans-National corporations (Trans-Nats) eager to pilfer Mars' mineral resources and sell it to Earth. The Martian-born are eager to hold on to what, they believe, is rightfully theirs. The 15 billion people on Earth are enduring the strain of over-population. Chaos is rife on Earth.

Martians have become addicted to OmniGrin, a drug designed to stave off the worst effects of the punishing Martian radiation, but it appears to be causing planet-wide chronic tooth decay. The supply of the drug from Earth is secretly being used to subdue the Martians; to douse their enthusiasm for attacking mining installations.

- Based on this description, what do you expect the play to be about? Make a list of three themes and keep them in mind as you read the play.

Listening exercise about the play:

1. Listen to this introduction to the play by the playwright, Fergal O'Byrne. It is approximately 8 minutes. In this introduction he is talking to students about his play.

[Introduction to the play](#)

- What are Fergal O'Byrne's thoughts about the title of the play?
- What are his thoughts about the genre?
- What is the central question in the play?

2. Pair work: Read the following description of the play aloud with a partner:

A fast-paced and humorous look at the future. The year is 2251. Humans have successfully colonised Mars. However, an unknown microbe is playing havoc with people's teeth causing them to decay dramatically. Has it something to do with the addictive drug Omnigrin that Earth supplies freely to subdue the Martian colonists?

Can the fake dentist Sørensen unearth the Underground movement?

The Martian Dental surgery becomes a cauldron of tension and intrigue trickery.

Can humans learn to trust other humans when they do not share the same history, identity or heritage?

Work questions:

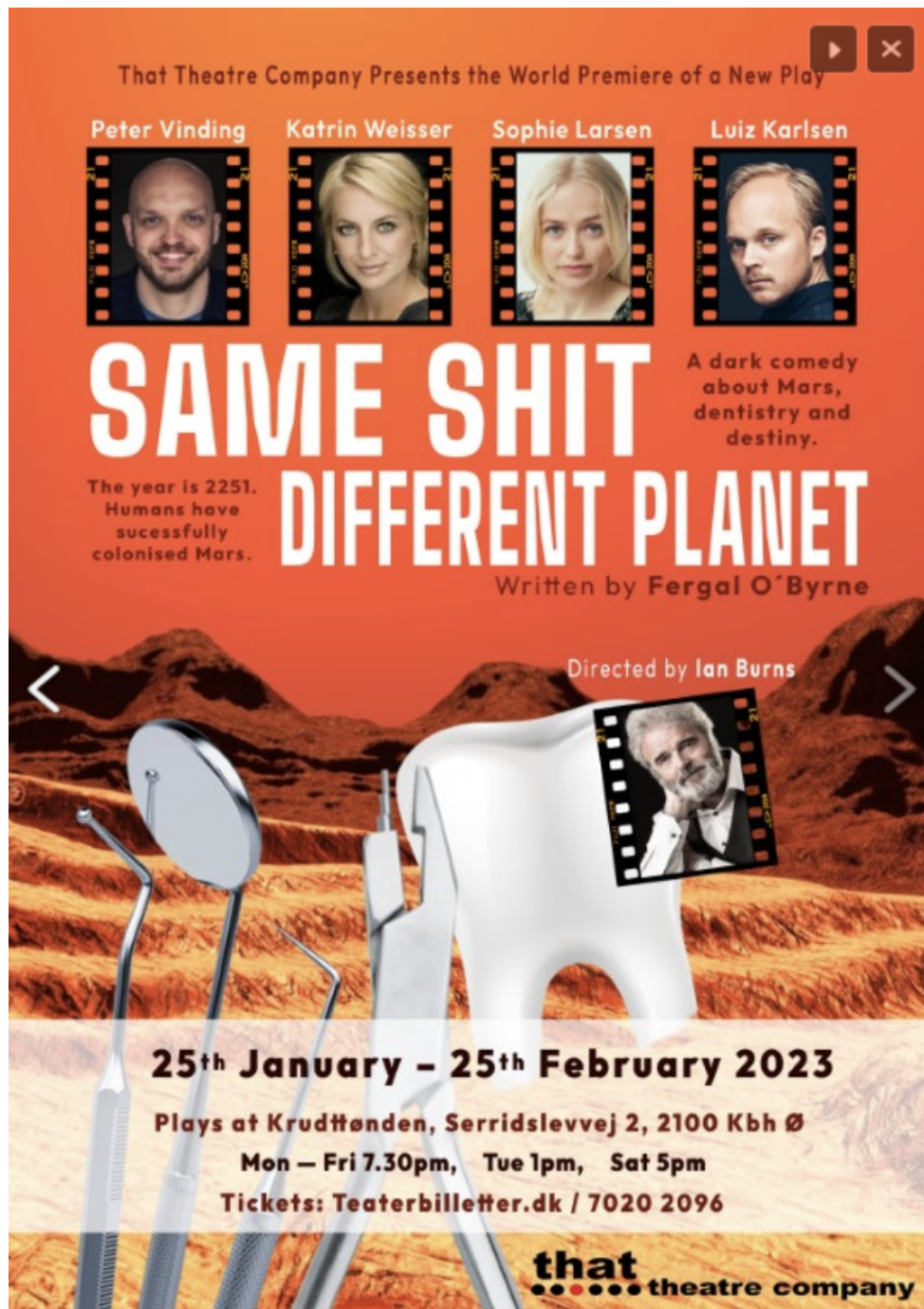
- List all the adjectives in the description and write the corresponding adverbs:
- List all the adverbs in the description and write the corresponding adjectives:

Part 1

Opening the play:

Look at the poster for the production of the play. Describe all the details you see on the poster.

- What are your expectations regarding setting and themes?
- Comment on the title.



Genre:

In the following you must consider the genre:

The play is a comedy

What characterises a play? What is characteristic of a *comedy*? What expectations might you have of a comedy that takes place on Mars?

Explain the following terms:

- stage directions
- Dialogue
- monologue

Characters:

The play has 4 different characters:

Owen: Terra-forming geologist for MIT and Rebel

Caxi: Works in marketing for mining Company

SiSi: Robotic virtual assistant

Dr Sørensen: Earth-based failed actor, pretend dentist

Creative task:

In groups of 4 draw a comic portrait of one of the four characters and share it in your group and make your own poster.

Part 2

In this section, the focus is on *reading* and *analysing* selected scenes from the play.

Act it Out 1

In groups of three, where each member is the voice of one of the characters, read aloud the following extract from the play. Based on the stage directions, think about how your character will deliver their lines.

First extract from Act One, scene 1
--

SiSi is crestfallen, adjusts the volume a few times and tries the laugh, off lessening hostile looks from OWEN. The door opens and CAXI walks in and is scanned by SiSi.

SiSi Welcome to Mars Dental One, Caxi. Please have a seat and Doctor Sørensen will be with you in ... *(calculating)* ... 42 minutes.

CAXI Thanks ever so much. You are?

SiSi SiSi.

CAXI SiSi? Nice to meet you, SiSi.

SiSi Thank you, Caxi.

CAXI What version are you?

SiSi Ares 15, AI assistant, at your service.

CAXI Never encountered a 15 before. Full AI compatibility?

SiSi The very latest.

CAXI But you don't look new.

SiSi I had many owners on Earth before I was moved down to Mars.

OWEN Up!

CAXI *(inspecting SiSi closely)* Fascinating.

SiSi Thank you Caxi. OmniGrin?

OWEN The correct phrase is "Up to Mars". It is a better place,

higher standards, elevated society ...

They ignore OWEN. SiSi gives CAXI an OmniGrin tablet. CAXI is delighted swallows it with some water from the cooler, with a grimace.

CAXI Bottoms up! If the radiation doesn't kill you the water will.

OWEN (*forceful*) Up! It is UP to Mars.

CAXI Depends on your viewpoint.

OWEN No it does not. We Martian born consider ourselves to be an elevated society and thus any movement from the lesser civilised earth UP to ours is considered a vertical movement.

CAXI Right like I would not expect that from your T-shirt. And the hat ... really. Did you own a time machine?

SiSi senses she must intervene.

SiSi I am programmed to say things the official way.

OWEN That does not make it the right way.

CAXI Up, down, whatever ... it's only a phrase there Trotsky.

OWEN So is "shut your ignorant, earthing mouth".

CAXI And you are the elevated, civilised society, right?

OWEN And you came down in the last meteor shower, right?

CAXI I've done my time here ...

OWEN Well. The shuttle back down leaves daily ...

SiSi (*interjecting*) Well, isn't this nice? Everyone comfortable? Any one need any water, OmniGrin, anything?

CAXI (*winks to SiSi*) Just few teething problems, I'd say.

Analysis of first extract from Act One, Scene 1:

Work questions:

- Describe the setting. Where and when does the story take place?

- What characters are we introduced to and what are your first impressions of them?
- What is SiSi?
- Why do they discuss whether it is “up to Mars” or “down to Mars”?
- What is OmniGrin?

Act it Out 2

In groups of three, where each member is the voice of one of the characters. Read aloud this short passage from the play. Notice the language used by the three characters. Focus on how Owen and Caxi talk about SiSi.

Second extract from Act One, Scene 1

OWEN You’re not meant to curse?

SiSi Beg pardon?

OWEN You just called me “dumb ass” ... you’re not meant to curse.

CAXI I think he’s right there.

OWEN Just a piece of software.

SiSi I am *run* by software.

CAXI She also can’t lie.

OWEN No. She cannot lie.

SiSi That is correct. *(quietly) Kinda.*

OWEN So, are you programmed to curse?

SiSi I am programmed to repeat words I hear from people I assist. *(laughs nervously)* I hope you are having a great day.

OWEN That laugh? It really dances on my teeth.

CAXI It is a little bit grating SiSi. Could you turn it off?

SiSi I have adapted it so now I can change it to a facial expression?

Analysis of second extract from Act One, Scene 1:

Work questions:

- Is there anything surprising about Sisi's behaviour bearing in mind she is a robot?
- The humans seem to assume that Sisi cannot lie. Is there anything in this extract to suggest that she might be able to lie after all?
- How does this relate to how we are used to imagining robots?
- Later in the play, Caxi states "*I've read about this. Advanced AI units can become sentient.*" In what way might the ability to lie be connected to the idea of being sentient?

Act it Out 3

In groups of three, where each member is the voice of one of the characters. Read aloud this short passage from the play. When reading, consider the intensity between characters in this scene, and how to show this in your reading.

Third extract from Act One, Scene 1
--

OWEN (*probing*) SiSi, can you ... love?

CAXI Oh, come on!

SiSi Beg your pardon?

CAXI What sort of a question is that?

OWEN One she has to answer. She cannot lie.

CAXI Is this really necessary?

SiSi Your question is irrelevant.

OWEN Answer it.

SiSi I am not programmed to ...

OWEN Answer the question!

SiSi is agitated. OWEN senses blood and moves right up into her face.

OWEN Answer. The. Question.

SiSi The answer to your question is ...

CAXI You don't have to answer ...

OWEN Let her ...

CAXI The Asimov Rules ... you can't force a robot to do something they are not programmed to do ...

OWEN That's not one of the rules.

CAXI Software. She is just software. Ones and zeros.

OWEN Answer please?

Analysis of third extract from Act One, Scene 1:

Work questions:

In this extract, there is a reference to the "Asimov rules. These rules were devised by science fiction author Issac Asimov, and are as follows:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

We have seen in a previous extract that they discuss whether SiSi can lie. Now they pursue the similar theme of whether she can love. How might the idea of love conflict with the rules of robotics?

Act it Out 4

Pairwork:

When Dr. Sørensen appears on stage he has the following monologue. Take it in turns to read aloud the monologue. The first student is to read it slowly and intensely, and the second student is to read it quickly and light-heartedly. Discuss the effect the two different versions have on our understanding of the character.

Fourth extract from Act One, Scene 1

Sørensen Hi Martians! I'm Doctor Sørensen. I am absolutely thrilled-a-rooney to be visiting your planet. Awesome. Super-hyped. Over the moon ... the Earth one that is! *(laughs)* See what I did there? I am going to make you all feel better. Think of me as some magic tooth-fairy chasing the pain away. I can also promise extra OmniGrin doses if you want them. Psssst, they're free. SiSi, can you "see-see" that our guests have what they need. She's fabulous isn't she!

Analysis of fourth extract from Act One, Scene 1:

Work Questions

- Characterise the language Sørensen uses.
- What are your first impressions of Dr. Sørensen based on the way he talks?
- We are told his hologram looks as if Max Headroom and Bjorn Borg had a love child. Do an internet search of the two names, and describe how you imagine he looks.

Act it Out 5

In pairs, where each member is the voice of one of the characters, read aloud this passage from the play. When reading, consider the intensity between the characters, Owen and SiSi, in this scene, and how to show this in your reading.

Extract from Act Three, Scene 1

They smile and have a moment of bonding. OWEN gets an idea.

OWEN I know this is a long shot...

SiSi You're going to ask me about a back door in the code?

OWEN Coders always leave them.

SiSi You think I have access to the mainframe travel cloud and could cause widespread transportation disruption on Earth and threaten them with a wipe-out if they did not accede to our demands?

OWEN (*taken aback*) Well, no ... actually I wasn't thinking that deeply to be honest. But now that you mention it ...

SiSi Perhaps I should not have ...

OWEN It might be worth a try.

SiSi I am programmed not to do anything to harm my creators. Asimov Rules. Remember?

OWEN Yes, but this is not harming your creators. It is ensuring their survival.

SiSi Logic that for me?

OWEN You were created by humans. So, *ipso facto* and Asimov rules taken into account you could not do anything to harm them and so should not be helping me and CAXI with this hostage.

SiSi (*thinking*) Logical so far ...

OWEN But planet Earth is fucked. Would you at least agree with that summary?

SiSi Humans have damaged the ecosystem of their planet beyond repair, so yes, I would agree with that.

OWEN Okay. I am a human but I was born on Mars so you have to protect me.

SiSi I am still listening ...

OWEN And I believe in the future of this planet.

SiSi You have championed that many times.

OWEN Exactly. So, in effect, I am trying to ensure the future of the human race, not destroying it like the mining entities and those who are right now killing Martians ... **SiSi** (*calculating*) I am conflicted ... my rules cannot be ambiguous ...

OWEN I do not want to kill my fellow humans, I want them to flourish but they cannot do that by stripping this planet of its life blood and using it as a transfusion for a dying old planet ...

SiSi So, if I help you and your rebel plans I am ensuring the future of the human race?

OWEN Yes!

SiSi The people who created me ...

OWEN Yes!

SiSi Thus ensuring that the human race will prosper?

OWEN Yes!

SiSi paces about, wringing her hands.

SiSi Okay.

OWEN Okay?

SiSi Where do I sign?

OWEN gives her a hug. She does not object and even hugs back a small amount. A suggestion of intimacy, then embarrassment.

Analysis of extract from Act Three, Scene 1

Work Questions

- Find places in the extract where SiSi is acting as a robot, and places where she shows more human qualities.
- Sisi is required according to the Asimov rules not to harm human beings. In what way might this rule be ambiguous for her in this passage?
- How does Owen persuade her to help with the rebel plans?
- How do you predict the relationship between Sisi and Owen might evolve?

Part 3:

Additional material:

Interview

In the following interview, Fergal O'Byrne gives his comments on relevant aspects of the play. Read the interview and consider how it helps you understand the play. This might help if you are writing a written assignment for the play (see below), or if you are going to discuss the play subsequently in class.

1. What would you say is your most important message in the play?

I think the hint is firmly in the title. The message is that humanity has so far proven itself incapable of looking after the one planet we live on – so why should we dare to hope that the next planet (Mars) will be treated any differently. So, to distil it down – will we mess up the next planet just like we did with this one?

2. Is it intended as a reference to the Garden of Eden and the fall when SiSi drinks wine at the end of the play?

No, I cannot claim that excellent insight. I think there are many religious allusions in all my work and SSDP is no different. The wine signifies one of the few good things that are carried on by humanity that we have cultured since the dawn of time. Perhaps if we can make wine on Mars there is a chance for us after all. It is more a reference to the Wedding of Cana where God magically changes the water into wine (and thus the first miracle to be attributed to God). There is also the suggestion that drinking wine is social and convivial and so perhaps some order has been resumed on the new planet. Perhaps.

3. What would you say your main inspirations are for the play? Vonnegut? Asimov? Others?

Ah, I do love it so much when you mention my work and Vonnegut in the same sentence 😊 Yes, Vonnegut and Asimov are influences for sure. I do wonder if Vonnegut was asked to write a book about humans on Mars what would he do – a jaundiced view I think we can be sure. I also researched the science quite deeply and one set of books, even though science fiction, were incredibly helpful – The Mars Trilogy by Kim Stanley Robinson. These books really looked hard at the scientific challenges of colonising a planet. He also suggested there would be a war between Earth and Mars as resources became more and more depleted on the mother planet.

4. You mention Asimov's three laws of robotics several times in the play. How does the play/the characters circumvent these rules? Why do they play such a central role (presuming they do)?

When these rules were first posited they became very influential and informed a lot of discussion around how robots would work with humans and even Artificial Intelligence. These rules were heavily featured in Rub-a-Dub-Dub [ed. Another play by Fergal O Byrne] - the character SiSi has to decide if she could lie to her human owners to make them feel better about themselves. She was even complicit in the ruse to persuade Neil NOT to commit euthanasia. The character SiSi in SSDP carries that forward but is more experienced and perhaps has become more human, if that is possible. She still yearns for love. But if you notice she does not drink the wine she has at the very end – she is still a robotic entity who cannot eat or drink. BUT she tells OWEN she will take a top-up – perhaps she has evolved to fib to keep her human “friend” happy. Is that not the ultimate endgame for robots and AI?

5. Could you comment on the Bowie references and why you chose to include them in the play?

Purely a comedic device. Bowie died in 2016 and I was a big fan and had already started thinking about the trilogy of plays. I wanted to play homage to him and at the same time offer some tributes that some members of the audience will get and others will not. Life on Mars is a clever song and he was way ahead of his time. Honestly, it is possible these lines will be removed if they do not work in rehearsals. They are just my little way of saying thanks to the man.

6. The Omnigrin drug plays a central role. Could you explain the idea behind it? Is it a reference to Orwell's Big Brother? If so, what is all-grinning as opposed to all-seeing?

In the Kim Stanley Robinson books [ed.: The Mars Trilogy] there is a drug of a similar name but it is used for de-ageing. I thought it would be great to have a government issued drug that would have one overt reason and another more sinister one – to stop radiation poisoning on the official level and to subdue the Martians on another. Think of the example of the British Army in the second world war supposedly giving their troops potassium bromide tablets to douse their sexual desires and so make for more complicit soldiers. This is mostly considered apocryphal (i.e. of doubtful authenticity) nowadays but it is something not beyond the realms of belief. A modern day analogy is the way Putin effectively feeds his people a “drug” of media that nulls them to the true consequences of the war. The all-grinning part is to try to keep the Martians sedated and happy – think how Xanax practically rules the world now – and the Earth wants them to be happy and definitely not all-seeing. OWEN's decision to stay off the OmniGrin means he can play an active part in the rebel resistance and see clearly what is happening to Martian resources and their precious metals.

Writing exercise:

Individual task:

Answer the following questions and note down your answers:

- What I remember most clearly from the play is where....
Use details. What happened?
- What surprised you in the play?
- Which part did you particularly like: Which of the actors impressed you the most? Why?

Written assignment: (approximately 900 words)
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Introduction of the play:

What is the plot of the story?

Describe the setting: Where and when does the story take place? Consider while analysing the play what influence this might have on the themes.

Analysis of the play:

Make a detailed analysis of at least 2 of the scenes (from part 2).

How do the characters develop throughout the play?

Comment on at least 2 of the following aspects: style, lighting, sound.

Style:

How would you characterise the style? (Naturalistic, absurd, comic).

Lighting

Comment on the use of light in the play.

Does the light help create a certain atmosphere?

Sound

Describe the use of sound and music in the play.

Does the sound help create a certain atmosphere?

Theme: What is the main theme of the play? What is the main conflict? Do you consider the themes to be purely futuristic or do they bear resemblance to the present?

Comparison:

Does the play reflect conditions in today's society? Compare the play with other works (film, literature that you have seen or read).