



# Study Guide 2026

Oregon Shakespeare Festival



## ON THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001,

a plane hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46am. Many observers and journalists initially believed it to be a terrible accident. When a second plane hit the South Tower twenty minutes later, the reality became clear: this was no accident. Within 90 minutes, additional crashes at the Pentagon and a remote field in Pennsylvania confirmed that a group of terrorists had hijacked the planes and turned them into weapons. In total, nearly 3000 people died as a result of the attacks including all the planes' passengers and crew as well as people in and around the World Trade Center and Pentagon. These attacks hold the somber marker of being the deadliest terror attack on American soil. As the world watched reports of the attacks on television and stared, horrified, at images of the destruction, another story was about to unfold: one of compassion, generosity, and hope.



The tiny town of Gander, Newfoundland—once a center of aviation for the North Atlantic—mobilized as 38 planes from all over the world descended on their town, having been re-routed after authorities closed American airspace. Over the next few days, the citizens of Gander and several surrounding towns opened their homes, churches, schools, and hearts to nearly 7,000 stranded passengers and flight crew. By the time the “plane people” departed, many had become honorary “islanders” and formed lifelong friendships with locals and with each other. *Come From Away* celebrates those extraordinary days and the people for whom “a candle’s in the window and the kettle’s always on.”



# HOW DID *COME FROM AWAY* COME INTO BEING?

Married writing team Irene Sankoff and David Hein met at Toronto's York University, where they both studied theatre and music. Sankoff grew up in North York, Ontario, as an avid musical theatre fan, while Hein hailed from Regina, Saskatchewan, and nurtured a love for Newfoundland folk music. The couple moved to New York after graduation to pursue their careers: Sankoff as an actor and Hein as a singer-songwriter.

They married only a month after the September 11th attacks in 2001. Realizing that their many acting and music gigs and side jobs kept them apart, Sankoff and Hein decided to start writing together. After a showing of their play *My Mother's Lesbian Jewish Wiccan Wedding* at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2009, Canadian producer Michael Rubinoff approached them with an idea he had unsuccessfully shopped to other writers: the true story of the people of Gander, Newfoundland, who generously welcomed 38 planes diverted after the 9/11 attacks.

Intrigued by the opportunity to tell a Canadian story, Sankoff and Hein applied for a grant from the Canadian government to visit Gander for its commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the attacks and interview those who had been there. They got the grant, spent three weeks in Gander, and left with hundreds of hours of interviews to transcribe. They hoped that their musical, first titled simply *Gander*, would be produced for another festival and maybe get a small Canadian tour. Instead, it got workshops at Good-

speed Musicals and the National Alliance for Musical Theatre and gained a producer, Junkyard Dog Productions. Productions at La Jolla Playhouse, Seattle Rep, Ford's Theatre, and the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto followed, as well as a concert staging in Gander.

*Come From Away* opened on Broadway on March 12, 2017. It was nominated for seven Tony Awards, including Best Musical, and ran for over 1,600 performances. It has since played at many major cities around the world, including several productions in Canada. A Gander production premiered in the summer of 2023 and has been remounted every summer since.



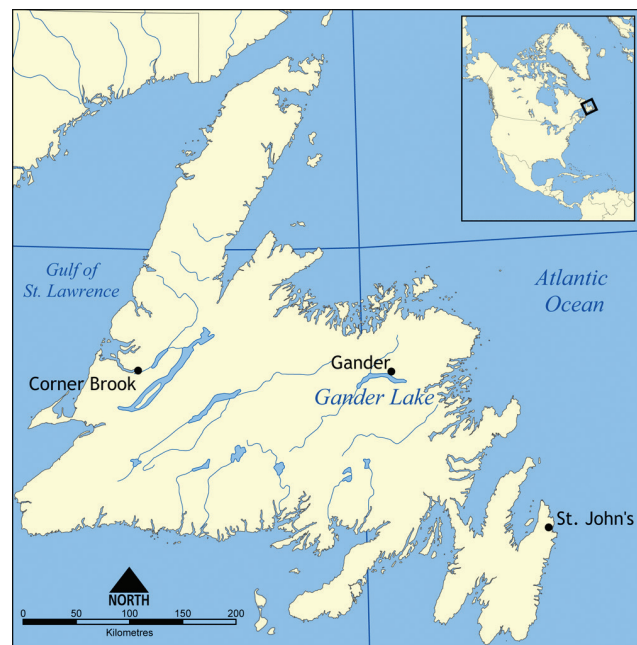
## YOU ARE HERE

### Gander Facts:

Province: Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada  
 Location: North Atlantic Ocean, Gulf of St. Lawrence, 48°57'26"N 54°35'19"W  
 Motto: Latin, "Volet Gander" ("May Gander Soar")  
 Current Population: Approx. 11,800  
 Time zone: UTC-03:30  
 Official Bird: Atlantic Puffin  
 Once known as: The "Crossroads of the World" because of its airport.

### 9/11 Memorials:

- A piece of steel from the World Trade Center was gifted by the Bethpage, NY Fire Department in 2011 to commemorate Gander's role in caring for the displaced passengers on 9/11.
- The "Rockaway 11" monument, designed by artist Sandra Priest, contains part of the concrete wall that formed the base of the World Trade Center. It is a monument to fallen Canadian firefighters and first responders.
- Placed at different sites around town are the "*Come From Away* Interpretive Panels" that highlight key places and events from the musical.



## Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the events of September 11, 2001, also known simply as "9/11." What motivated the attacks? What areas of the US were targeted, and what was their significance to the attackers? How did the affected communities deal with and respond to the tragedies? How did the US government respond?  
<https://www.911memorial.org/learn/resources/g11-primer>  
<https://www.911memorial.org>  
<https://www.explorewtc.com/en/local/things-to-do/g11-memorial-and-museum.html>  
<https://www.archives.gov/news/topics/g-11-anniversary>  
<https://millercenter.org/remembering-september-11/september-11-terrorist-attacks>
2. Where is Gander, Newfoundland and why was it chosen as the place to re-route 38 airplanes on September 11, 2001? Research its location and history as an aviation center and military base.  
<https://www.newfoundlandlabrador.com/destinations/gander>  
<https://www.gandercanada.com/recreation-activities-and-visitors/history/>  
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Gander-Newfoundland-and-Labrador>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gander\\_International\\_Airport](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gander_International_Airport)
3. Who lives in Gander? How big is the population? What do people there do for a living and for recreation? Find out what life in Gander is like from these sources:  
<https://www.gandercanada.com/media/nf3pwn5u/welcome-to-gander-guide-2020-july-28-2020-pdf.pdf>  
<https://www.gandercanada.com/media/bocctlu/town-of-gander-visitor-guide-2023-for-emailing.pdf>

4. *Come From Away* depicts many actual people from the town of Gander and some of the stranded passengers. These sources will tell you more about them and others not depicted in the play: Jim DeFede, *The Day the World Came to Town: 9/11 in Gander, Newfoundland*.  
<https://www.harpercollins.com/products/the-day-the-world-came-to-town-jim-defede?variant=32116520255522>  
<https://www.travelandleisure.com/travel-news/newfoundland-labrador-9-11-anniversary>  
<https://www.911memorial.org/connect/blog/lend-hand-do-what-you-can-remembering-generosity-gander>  
<https://youtu.be/IQO6fXkmjQA?si=g2Ei7edjbnmt7Xap>  
<https://youtu.be/ndmdB2XS6Jc?si=dCqwybsPLQ1ElxUD>  
<https://youtu.be/yZdj1LxqGr?si=L8Pgs9Yu4oaxF4fw>
5. How did the authors of *Come From Away* – Irene Sankoff and David Hein – develop this musical? How did they come up with the idea? How did they research Gander and its people? Find out about their process from these sources:  
<https://dacapopublishing.com/titles/irene-sankoff/come-from-away-welcome-to-the-rock/9780316422222/>  
<https://comefromaway.com/index.php>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Come\\_from\\_Away](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Come_from_Away)  
<https://youtu.be/81hdPkscpH8?si=gBpOisTghGdiONA>  
<https://youtu.be/kfMoPgMfRVI?si=NaqzRriaJ7avpooW>
6. Traditional music of Newfoundland is featured heavily in *Come From Away*. Learn more about Gander's musical heritage from these sources:  
<https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/arts/music-arts.php>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music\\_of\\_Newfoundland\\_and\\_Labrador](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_of_Newfoundland_and_Labrador)  
<https://blog.mcneelamus.com/traditional-irish-music-irish-instruments/>
7. Learn more about Islamophobia and hate crimes against Muslim and Middle Eastern populations that spiked in the aftermath of 9/11. These sources discuss the challenges and dangers facing those communities:  
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/post-9-11-surveillance-has-left-a-generation-of-muslim-americans-in-a-shadow-of-distrust-and-fear>  
<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/09/muslim-americans-reflect-on-the-impact-of-9-11/>  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/01/muslims-are-a-growing-presence-in-u-s-but-still-face-negative-views-from-the-public/>



RCAF Station Gander Newfoundland was a major base and airport during WWII. This early WWII patch was manufactured by Crest Craft and dates between 1940-42,

The town of Gander, Newfoundland and Labrador, is indeed named after geese. Specifically, its name derives from the abundant wild Canada geese that frequent the area.



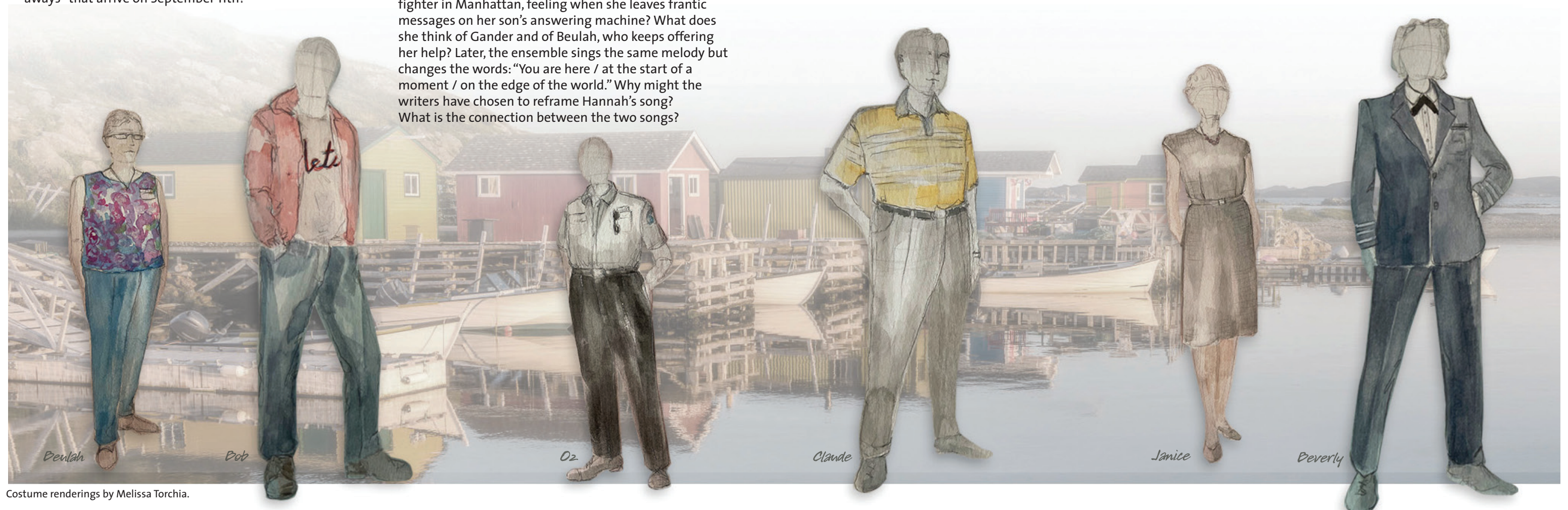
## After seeing/reading the play

1. What does the musical's title refer to? What does it mean to "come from away"?
2. How does "Welcome to the Rock," the opening number, introduce the audience to the world of Gander? Who do we meet? What does a typical day in Gander look like? How would you describe the sound of the music and the characters' voices? What do we learn about the people of Gander: their sense of humor, how they interact with each other, how they function as a community? What are their values?



## What does being an "islander" mean to them?

3. The Gander citizens repeat the phrase "I am an islander" in the opening number and several times throughout the show. What does being an "islander" mean to them? How do Gander's location, climate, and isolation shape their identities? What is it about living on "The Rock" that makes them rely on each other? What does it have to do with their response to the unexpected "come from aways" that arrive on September 11th?



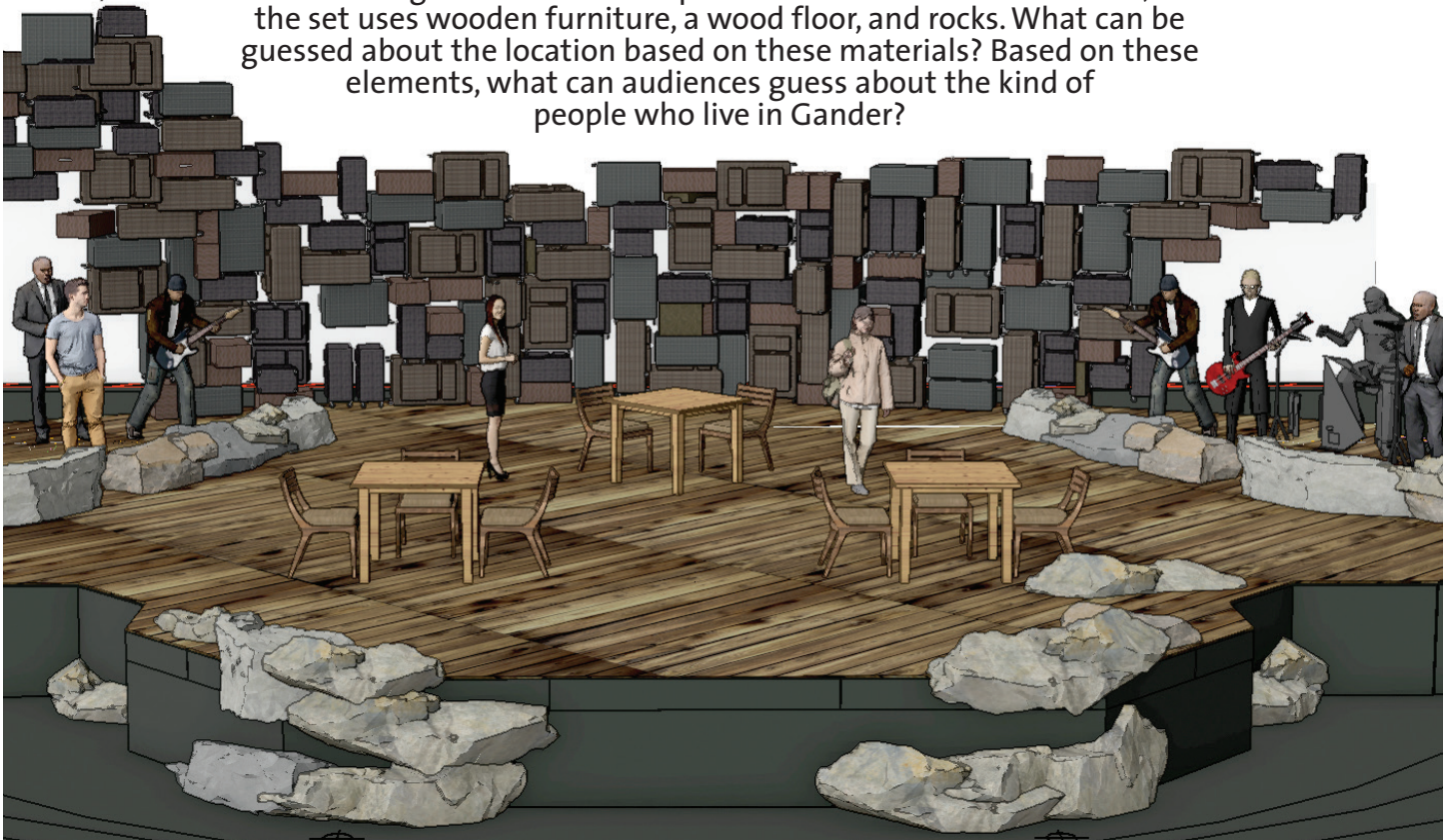
Costume renderings by Melissa Torchia.

4. Refer to your research on the traditional music of Newfoundland. How does the music of "Welcome to the Rock" and "Screech In" reflect the cultural background of Newfoundland? How would you describe the style of the music? Does it sound like a particular genre or the traditional music of another country or culture? Can you identify any of the instruments?
5. The song "Prayer of St. Francis," sometimes known as "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace" was written in 1967 by Sebastian Temple, a Franciscan priest, and is often sung in the Catholic mass. Why do you think the authors of *Come From Away* chose to have characters from multiple faiths sing it? What does its inclusion suggest about the nature of faith?
6. Beverley Bass's song, "Me and the Sky," is one of the only solo songs in the show. Why might the authors have decided to feature her? Describe her journey from a young girl discovering flying for the first time, learning to pilot a plane, then moving through the ranks of a major airline to become a captain. How is her experience as a female pilot relevant to the plot of *Come From Away*? Why does the 9/11 attack make her reflect on her career and relationship with flight?
7. A common device in musicals is to repeat a song in a different context with slightly altered words to highlight a shift in a character's perspective. Consider Hannah's song, "I Am Here." How is Hannah, whose son is a firefighter in Manhattan, feeling when she leaves frantic messages on her son's answering machine? What does she think of Gander and of Beulah, who keeps offering her help? Later, the ensemble sings the same melody but changes the words: "You are here / at the start of a moment / on the edge of the world." Why might the writers have chosen to reframe Hannah's song? What is the connection between the two songs?
8. Some of the characters join a "Screech In," a raucous "ceremony" that initiates honorary Newfoundlanders. How does each of the characters feel about the tradition? Why does Kevin J. get so upset with Kevin T. at his willingness to embrace the ceremony? Why does Nick agree to "kiss the cod"?
9. In "Stop the World," Diane marvels at the island's geological history: "Look at this: Five hundred and forty million years ago, the continents of the world crashed together right here. And two hundred million years ago, they separated again, moving apart from each other." Why is this significant? How does the geology mirror Nick and Diane's relationship? How does it reflect the larger story of the "islanders" and the "plane people"?
10. In the song "Something's Missing," the islanders and the passengers face a destabilizing return to "normal." What has changed overnight for these people? For America? What do they grapple with as they learn the full extent of the attacks?
11. While *Come From Away* is set amidst a tragedy, there are several moments of laughter, joy, and celebration. How do the characters deal with conflicting emotions in this extremely sad and stressful time? How do the writers balance the tone of the show? How do the moments of levity stand next to those of great sorrow and loss?
12. *Come From Away* takes place 25 years ago, yet some of the questions and issues raised in the show – some of which were direct responses to the events of 9/11 – remain with us today. How have the conversations around such topics as same-sex relationships, religious tolerance, and fear of Muslim or Middle Eastern people evolved in the last 25 years? Did you notice any other issues raised that we are still grappling with?
13. The film critic Alise Chaffins calls the Gander residents' aid to the diverted passengers "radical hospitality." What makes their acts of kindness "radical"? <https://deusex-cinema.substack.com/p/come-from-away-discussion-questions-hospitality>
14. *Come From Away* was written for a small cast playing multiple characters. How did the actors make each of their characters distinct, especially when switching quickly from one to another? How did the costumes delineate characters?
15. Along those same lines, the show takes place in several locations in and around Gander, including different planes. How did the design of the set, lighting, and sound help to define locations?
16. Imagine your town receiving thousands of people after a tragedy, like the Gander islanders. How might people react? How might you help out?

# THE SET

The main gesture in the set for OSF's *Come From Away* is a wall of suitcases that rises above performers' heads at the left and right of the stage (represented by the rectangles in the rendering).

What might the suitcases represent? Other than the suitcases, the set uses wooden furniture, a wood floor, and rocks. What can be guessed about the location based on these materials? Based on these elements, what can audiences guess about the kind of people who live in Gander?



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