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Teaching Theater in a Minority-Majority Classroom

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There is an obstacle that all educators face. It is one which we have all faced, and considered how to overcome, and to which each of us has applied our own unique solutions. That being how to answer the eternal question from students: “why should I care?”, or more specifically, “why should I care about what you are currently trying to teach me?”.

Now, of course, each subject has its own routine answers to this question. Mathematicians point out the various ways in which math affects a person’s life after school, from earnings to taxes to potential usage in various careers. Science teachers can tell of the ways in which science helps us understand the physical building blocks of the world we live in and deepen our understanding of it. History teachers perhaps teach the most difficult of the core subjects, but can always defend the utility of their courses with a similar defense as the scientists, except the building blocks are more philosophical and metaphysical than strictly literal and physical.

What then, of the theater teacher (or, indeed, most of the fine arts)? Our task in answering this questions is perhaps most difficult of all. It is further complicated, in the case of theater, by the fact that many of our students, particularly in low-income school districts, often have absolutely no experience with theatrical productions outside of, perhaps, elementary school or church plays. It follows then, that many students’ initial thoughts about the theater are something along the lines of “this hasn’t been impactful on my lived experience at all up to the present, why would I devote brain power to it now?” This is entirely understandable, and a significant barrier to creating engaged thespians.

And there is yet still a further complication! Many of our students, if they have any conception of theater at all, see it as something for “rich white people”, and they are well aware of the fact that factors beyond their control exclude them from both of the first two qualities (thankfully most of society has at least agreed we all satisfy the last one.)

Theater as an art form and an industry, unlike movies and visual art, has not made great strides in bridging this gap, for a variety of reasons, including the expense of putting on a high quality production, the specialized venues required for some shows, and (up until relatively recently) a comparative dearth of high quality shows meant for different demographics of audience. While nearly all students have seen art at some point, even if they’ve never set foot in a gallery, and they’ve almost certainly watched a movie, even if they’ve never considered what sets a “good” movie apart from a “bad” one. There is a very low chance any of them has

ever sat through a full production of even the most popular musical or play, let alone performed in one. And if they have done either, it was when they were in elementary school in an academic or religious setting, forever giving theater the undesirable air of being "a kids thing" that high schoolers are (of course) entirely too cool for.

How then, with all of the problems and barriers discussed up to this point, are we to reach our students? This course unit seeks to answer that question, utilizing little known aspects of the history of theater, both American and otherwise, as well as areas of modern theater that are consciously trying to correct some of the deficiencies of the art form from the past.

On the historical side, the book *Black Like You,* by cultural historian John Strausbaugh, was a valuable text, dealing as it does with the history of depictions of racial characteristics in various forms of American media from the beginnings of the country into the early twentieth century. As the title indicates, the book is primarily concerned with depictions of African Americans by white Americans, starting with an examination of the history and meaning behind "blackface" in American theater. Strausbaugh's research reveals that while negative racial depictions of black Americans were indeed part of the makeup of early theater, he also finds that "It's important to remember that on the vaudeville stage these blackfaced "Ethiopians" rubbed elbows with various other brands of broadly played ethnic stereotypes and impersonations, for equally low laughs—the brawling Irish, wheedling Jews, oily Italians, thick-headed Germans…maybe we should call these greenface, jewface, pastaface, potatoface…"[1] They were in many cases (though certainly not all) not necessarily any more mean spirited than negative representations of any other racial group. Additionally, many of the most successful and famous "blackface" actors and actresses were themselves black, and these comedians carried the characteristics of the form well past the point where it had become unacceptable for white comedians to use them. This in and of itself might lead to interesting discussions with students regarding the usage of tropes like this by and for different casts and audiences, but on a more general level serves to illustrate that American theater, from the beginning, has been heavily influenced and populated by minority voices.

Latinos and American Popular Culture, by Patricia Montilla, also proved a useful resource with its overview of the contributions of Latino and Latina artists to American culture. While it is concerned with the broader culture, as opposed to just theater, it does include information on many different actors who have performed both on stage and off screen.

Many of the show texts themselves also provide proof for this premise. While of course the works of Lin Manuel Miranda, such as *Hamilton* and *In the Heights*, have achieved huge success in popular culture in the 21st century, they are far from the only examples of works written by and for black and latino audiences and actors. Students should examine works such as *A Raisin in the Sun, Evita, The Wiz,* and *The Color Purple* for earlier examples of the impact of their cultures on the history of theater. An examination of these works will also allow students to compare the experiences of the authors with their own, thereby recognizing the applicability of theater to their own personal lives, as well as highlighting the ability of the art form to speak to cultures and times other than their own. My hope, in including older shows and forms of theater in the body of the unit, is that students might also come to recognize how the fight for equal rights and representation has changed over the years since these shows were written, as well as the ways in which they have remained the same.

Actors and actresses from similar backgrounds and communities to their own can also help to bring theater home for many students. Thus, this project will also encourage students to examine the lives and

performances of actors and actresses such as Leslie Odom Jr, John Leguizamo, and Rita Moreno.

It is my hope that, after completing this unit, students and teachers both will better understand the reasons that theater applies to them, their experiences, and even their futures. I hope to instill in them as well the idea that theater, far from being a foreign art form, unrelated to their community, is an integral part of the human experience, for them as much as for anyone else.

Classroom Context

My classroom is a majority-minority classroom in Central Texas, with 80% of our student population being black and/or Hispanic. As a result, these are the heritages upon which I will be primarily focusing in this unit. If your classroom differs significantly in composition, feel free to substitute works more appropriate to your population where useful. For instance, *Allegiance,* by George Takei, may be more interesting to your students than *The Wiz* if you have many students of Japanese ancestry.

Content Objectives

Romeo and Juliet

For an example, let us look to *Romeo and Juliet*. Now, on the one hand, everyone has at least heard of it, and, at least in the state of Texas, everyone is required to read it at least once in their school career. It is, most English teachers will agree, a literary classic, with much to say about young love, unthinking hatred between social groups, and the consequences of both of those things interacting with one another. It is also, it must be said, almost five hundred years old. In that time, the English language has changed significantly, as have literary styles and theatrical customs and presentations. So putting aside its value as a work of literature, is it still good theater? Can our students see themselves in it? For many, unfortunately, the answer is no, as the barriers created by antiquated language and 500 year old cultural traditions are too high to overcome. This is, of course, not to say that some number of students in the 21st century might yet be deeply affected by the Bard's work in Romeo and Juliet or his other plays and sonnets, but it's unfair to many students to present the material as is and expect a positive emotional or personal response.

This is not an unrecognized problem, and in fact many modern theatrical works of the 20th century and beyond are conscious restagings of Shakespearean works, with the goal, as in this course unit, of bringing works set in times and places far removed from our own home, and reframing them in settings and language more familiar and understandable to us. Take, for example, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim's *West Side Story*. The show, a Broadway Musical, takes the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* and recenters it in the barrios of New York City. Instead of the feuding families, the Montagues and Capulets, you have two gangs struggling for turf and respect, the Sharks and the Jets. This reframing also allows for the addition of additional context relevant to today's readers, as the Sharks are a Puerto Rican gang, and the Jets are white. After establishing the relationship between the two groups, the show proceeds along similar lines as the original Shakespeare, with Tommy, of the Jets, falling in love with Maria, sister of the leader of the Sharks. They carry on a secret

relationship, but ultimately Tommy is felled in the struggle between the two gangs, and Maria is left to deliver a powerful message on what the two groups' hate has wrought in their lives.

For students, a comparison of the balcony scene, from Act 2 Scene 2 of Romeo and Juliet[2] , and the same scene from *West Side Story,* Act 1 Scene 5,[3] will be enlightening. Many of the same feelings are there, and indeed are likely to be ones that students are familiar with, and perhaps even dealing with themselves. Strong, passionate love, fear of rejection, concerns about social barriers between them and the ones they love, and more are present in both texts, but are much more easily parsed from the more recent material. And, of course, these topics are also all likely to be ones that students are familiar with in their own lives, and Shakespeare's narrative and characters continue to hit home with significant power if read in a way which allows and promotes familiarity and empathizing with the characters.

Other Voices Raised in Song

So if most teenagers can find something of themselves in the story of *Romeo and Juliet,* what of more specific narratives, or perhaps ones more narrowly focused and applicable? History provides us with numerous examples. Since the beginning of what could be considered American culture, representations by and of nonwhite people have been extremely common. In fact, when American literary critic Constance Rourke began to analyze American culture, the presence and significance of black characters was undeniable. In addition to character types such as the Yankee (rich, urban, sometimes intelligent but seldom wise) and the frontiersman (the Yankee's opposite, poor, rural, and uneducated, but with a great understanding of the world around him), Constance placed the blackface, or minstrel show figures.[4] They often performed roles similar to the court jesters and tricksters in Shakespeare's plays. They were outsiders with insights into the things going on around them, often suggested to be laughing at the main characters.

Blackface performances today, of course, are rightly viewed as an antiquated and harmful style of theater, but it can still be useful to look at its history in theater, and through it how black people were depicted in theater until fairly recently. Its history goes back at least to Shakespeare's day, when the role of Othello was originated and played for years afterward by white actors covering their face with burnt cork.[5] This became the preferred way to portray black characters on stage in areas where white and black actors and patrons were discouraged or disallowed from interacting, which is to say most of the West at the time.

If we skip ahead to the American music halls of the 1800's, however, we begin to see these representations develop in association with the first American popular music. Loved by young people for its irreverent lyrics, viewed with disgust and disdain by their elders for its social transgression, the minstrel show, and the songs written for it, was one of the first, if not the very first, example of American music for the masses.[6] Again, while it cannot be overstated that the white actors playing black characters were doing so in insensitive and oversimplified ways, the point remains that the black characters in these shows were important and ever-present. Additionally, it was not just white actors playing these parts. Black actors like Ira Aldridge performed in minstrel shows, as well as taking more serious roles when afforded the opportunity. Aldridge himself was one of the first black actors to play Othello that we have a record of, and in an appreciable bit of irony, also played roles such as King Richard III, Hamlet, and Macbeth in whiteface! [7]

The songs themselves, once the minstrel show style of performance became nationally popular, were often written by black artists as well. James A Bland and William Henry Lane both rose to prominence as a songwriter and a performer, respectively on the minstrel circuits[8] . Lane and his touring group originated several popular dances of the 1860's, most notably a dance called the Juba, while some of Bland's music is

still recognized today, such as “Carry me Back to Old Virginny”, which served as the Virginia state song until 1997. Students and teachers alike might, upon learning this, be well served to ask if the participation of black people in the minstrel shows signifies an unfortunate succumbing to the prejudices of the time, or a deliberate taking control of their own images and portrayals in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War? If the former, it behooves us to ask how might they have done better? If the latter, then encourage the students to bring that power forward in their own creations and performances.

In music, perhaps, are the multicolored threads of America’s people drawn together most clearly. In 1892, solidly in what is generally known as the Jim Crow era of American history, Antonin Dvorak, a Czech composer of some renown, was invited to be the head of the National Conservatory of Music in New York. He was brought to the US with a specific mission: to create a uniquely American style of classical music, differentiated from the European inspired pieces which were being produced in the United States at the time. After listening to these pieces, as well as various other types of American music, his apprentice, a young black man named Harry Burleigh, introduced him to Negro spirituals such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Go Down, Moses”.

Here, at last, was the uniquely American music that Dvorak had been looking for. "The future of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies," he declared. "This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States." This sentiment, though prescient, was unfortunately not to the liking of the American culture of the time, and though the classical music community did eventually start working in themes and musical techniques from black music, it did so only haltingly, and after much of popular music had passed it by.

This passing-by was largely aided by men like Harry Burleigh himself, who trained several of the men and women who would go on to participate in the musical revolution of the Harlem Renaissance. Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and many more black artists revolutionized American music by fusing classical forms, learned from men like Burleigh and Dvorak, with black spirituals, popular music, and yes, minstrel shows, to create a new and wildly popular form of music, ragtime. From ragtime, artists, many of them black, continued to innovate, leading directly to American musical forms such as jazz, the broadway musical, rock n’ roll and hip hop. Chances are, if you have ever seen a live musical performance, that performance had a heavy influence by black artists somewhere in its DNA.[9]

Latin American performers and writers have likewise had a significant influence on American theater. In music, Latin influence can be heard in many of the earliest folk songs and popular music of Texas and California from any period after those regions’ separation from Mexico. Hispanic influence in New York theater and the broader American culture took somewhat more time to fully develop, but by the 1930’s and 40’s, they were undeniably as much a part of the American theatrical scene as any other.

The first sign of this nationwide penetration which we might discern comes from Argentina. Invented in the capital of Buenos Aires, the style of dance called tango (and explanations for the name are as numerous as they are contradictory) became quite popular in its home country before jumping ship and finding popularity in Paris. As Paris was considered something of a world leader in culture at the time, it wasn’t long before the Argentine tango was being danced in dance halls throughout the United States as well, despite cries from moral monitors that the close dancing and sexualized movements of the dance made it singularly immoral. One can easily imagine that these are some of the same reasons the dance became so popular with young people of the day.[10]

But so for styles and music, what about people? While it is certainly true that hispanic actors have suffered

more than their fair share of unfair opposition on both stage and screen, their exclusion has, thankfully, never been so widespread or complete as the opposition to black actors. From the earliest days of American theater, we have records of Hispanic actors playing both in casts and theaters of their own, as well as on stage with white actors of other heredity. In some cases, it must be noted, as with Rita Hayworth (aka Margarita Carmen Cansino) and Chris-Pin Martin (Ysabel Ponciana Chris-Pin Martin Paiz) these actors did feel the need to change their names in order to seem more "American", or to put it bluntly, white, this was unfortunately true at the time for many people with names that were considered insufficiently English sounding, with Jewish performers in particular having a long history of name modification for more popular appeal.

Desi Arnaz, an American of Cuban descent, was the first television actor to appear as part of a mixed race couple with Lucille Ball, a white actress, in *I Love Lucy*, a show which saw nearly unprecedented popularity in the early days of television[11] . In more recent years, numerous actors of Hispanic heritage have risen to unquestioned stardom on the large and small screen, with names like Danny Trejo, Rosario Dawson, and Aubrey Plaza recognizable to audiences from some of the most popular movies and television shows of the modern era. On stage, Tony Award winning actors and playwrights such as Lindsay Mendez and Lin Manuel-Miranda have performed in various roles, as well as drawing on their cultural history to produce wildly popular works like *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*.

Further evidence of the presence of Hispanic culture in American theater can be found if one looks to the various shows which have utilized Latin music and culture, even when not necessarily written in all cases by Latino authors. Shows like *Evita* and *West Side Story* acknowledge that themes and songs of Latin America are inextricably linked to the culture of the United States, and should be celebrated as such.

Raisin in the Sun

Now that the topic has been brought up, what then of the shows themselves? In addition to the update of *Romeo and Juliet* into *West Side Story,* there are other plays and musicals of the modern era that deserve our attention. The first play by a black female author, Lorraine Hansberry as well as the first to have a black director, Lloyd Richards, was *A Raisin in the Sun.* Premiering on Broadway in 1959, the play shows a poignant consciousness of the dichotomy between "blackness" and "whiteness", as described by Toni Morrison in the 1990's. In many ways this dichotomy is the core conflict of the play, as Beneatha, our protagonist is faced with it figuratively, in the form of her two suitors. George Murchison is an African American man who "dresses white" and encourages her to do the same, and seems to be entirely bought in to the American, capitalist system. He represents a black man who has, nevertheless, given himself over to what Morrison would call "whiteness" in literature and culture. On the other hand, and representing "blackness" or "Africanism" is Beneatha's other suitor, Joseph Asagai, who rejects the American system and white culture in favor of pride in his African heritage, going so far as to refer to Beneatha's straightening of her hair as "mutilation".

Beneatha is also faced with this struggle in a purely physical sense, as the other primary conflict of the play is her family being faced with the decision of whether to move and be the first black family in a white neighborhood, or accept a sum of money sufficient to alleviate their financial struggles as a bribe, at the cost of submitting and agreeing not to live there. This, of course, brings to mind the shadow of redlining and sundown towns, even if the violence is not so heavily implied as with those terms.

Raisin, though written by a black author and performed with a nearly all black cast, still asks questions relevant to many Americans of all skin colors. Any family of recent immigrants, or children of the same, can

sympathize with Beneatha's struggle. After all, for many of them, the question of how much to assimilate, and how much to hang on to, of the culture they have brought with them, is still a pressing one, and difficult to answer. The same, too, might well be true for anyone who feels like an "outsider" because of their preferences for music, dress, or any number of the other things by which teenagers organize their worlds and social systems. While Hansberry has intentionally written a specifically black play in *Raisin*, her themes and the questions which she uses them to address cannot help but have universal applicability in some respects.[12]

The Wiz

While *Raisin* is an excellent example of an original work created to celebrate African American culture, other shows give us a similar updating of a classic into a new and different context. Perhaps the most significant example of this type of show is *The Wiz,* written for Broadway by Charlie Smalls and William F Brown, and first directed by Geoffrey Holder in 1975. *The Wiz* is an adaptation of Frank L Baum's classic *Wizard of Oz,* with the aesthetics of Oz and Munchkinland replaced with New York and Harlem, respectively. Holder, who in addition to directing, also served as choreographer and costume designer for the original show, won Tony awards for best costume design and best director for the show, the first black man to be nominated for either category, let alone win![13]

While it does, generally speaking, follow the familiar plot of *The Wizard of Oz* (Dorothy is whisked from her home, encounters the munchkins, kills a witch, meets a scarecrow, tin man, and lion, kills another witch, and goes home) every aspect of the show is nonetheless tinged by black culture. Holder's costumes were consciously designed with an eye toward the Caribbean-American styles which he grew up with in Trinidad, and the music is not too dissimilar to that which one might have heard on the streets and in the churches of Harlem in the 1970's.

Here, again, a side by side comparison might be useful for students and teachers both. A picture of Judy Garland's iconic Dorothy set next to Diana Ross' version of the same character sets the tone, with Garland's blue dress and puffed sleeves presenting a contrast to Ross' slimmer lines and ruffled elegance, indicating 1970's Harlem's distance from Depression era Kansas in culture, as well as time and place. Even more extreme are Dorothy's companions, particularly the tin man. Where *Wizard of Oz*'s Tin man is constructed of well fitted and molded tin plates, which one might reasonably expect to have come from a machine shop or train yard, Holder's costume for the Tin Man is a marvel of design, as it appears to be nothing less than street sculpture come to life, seemingly built from the scraps of an urban environment, including pieces which suggest license plates, road signs, and more. Incidentally, this is another axis through which one can view theater, from its representation and glorification of rural life in shows like *Oklahoma* and *Wizard of Oz*, to more of an emphasis on urban life in shows such as *The Wiz* and *In the Heights*.

In the Heights

The latter show, *In the Heights* is an original musical written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, which premiered on Broadway in 2008. Miranda is undoubtedly one of the most popular song writers of the 21st century thus far, having had great success with both his other onstage efforts (*Bring it On, Hamilton)* and several movie musicals (*Moana, Encanto*). The playwright, whose heritage includes Puerto Rican, Mexican, English, and African American ancestry, is well known for his ability to weave the diverse musical traditions which he has inherited into songs and scores that speak to a wide variety of audiences and backgrounds.

In the Heights is the story of Usnavi, a young man who emigrated from Puerto Rico to the barrios of New York City when he was just a boy, and whose dream is to someday return and live out his *suenito*, his "little dream"

of owning and operating a bar/resort on a Puerto Rican beach as his father had. I have deliberately left discussion of this show until last because in many ways it, to me, weaves together all the themes and heritages previously discussed into a distinctly and uniquely American show. Usnavi's quest to return to a homeland he only barely remembers is but one part of a rich tapestry of a show, presented as a foil with a young woman and friend of his, Vanessa, an aspiring fashion designer whose primary goal is also to move out of Washington Heights, but in the opposite direction, buying further into the American way of life by moving "uptown" and embarking on a career in high fashion.

Several b-plots, or secondary plots in the show also resonate with modern American culture. Usnavi's high school nephew, Sonny, is an activist with a keen awareness of the inequities in class and race which form the reality in which he exists, and seeks to change them, but is stymied by his illegal status and the barriers which it creates to his desire to achieve a college education. Nina, a brilliant Latina whose family has gone to some pains to send her to Stanford, returns to Washington Heights intending not to return to school due both to the financial burdens it is putting on her family, as well as various incidents which have made her feel isolated and alone so far away from her family and community. Mama Claudia, the neighborhood grandmother, provides context, as she reminisces on the immigrant experience of her youth, when she was forced by poverty and revolution to leave her native country of Cuba to come to "Nueva York", and the way she and her family were treated upon arrival. Any or all of these experiences may very well resonate with students today, affecting not only they themselves but also potentially many of their family members as well. [14]

It is my hope that an analysis of these resources, as well as the techniques and exercises outlined below, will bring students to the realization that theater is not, as is so often supposed, a "rich, white" art form. Rather, it is an artform with roots in every society going back beyond the reach of human history, and its presence in America has, from the very beginning, included people of all shades and backgrounds. Our students today have an opportunity, and a privileged point in history and culture, to make their stories known, as well as to engage with the stories of other communities through theater in ways that have simply not been possible in the past, and I hope to encourage them to do just that with this unit and the research it contains.

Teaching strategy

This module will focus heavily on active learning. Few things are so discouraging, and contrary to the goal of instilling a love of learning in our students, than sitting at their desks and hearing someone talk at them about what they're supposed to be learning. No matter how interesting or talented of a speaker you are, you're bound to start losing attention after a certain amount of time. As an old professor of mine said, "the mind can only take in as much as the seat can take." For this reason, this unit will largely focus on ways for students to engage directly with the material and act upon it. Examples will include reading first hand accounts from playwrights and actors, reading selections from various plays and other works, and analyzing manuscripts for clarity and meaning.

There are, however, going to be times in which a more lecturing style may be the most effective or efficient method of getting information across to students. In these situations, I encourage teachers using this module to practice a little theater of their own in their method of presentation. Remember that the larger part of history is "story", and use that fact to your advantage. When dates must be mentioned for context or clarity, feel free to be general (Pre-Civil War, Post-war, During the depression, etc.) Rather than dates and timelines,

focus on the people, performers, playwrights, and others from all races that have woven the tapestry of American theater into the vibrant thing it is today, often while fighting off significant resistance from both within and outside of their communities.

Comparative reading will be a useful skill to practice and develop for both teachers and students. In the context of this unit, several sections will call for it. Instructors should choose an excerpt passages from both texts, for example *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story,* or *In the Heights* and *Raisin in the Sun,* and have the students read both passages. Then, in small groups, they can discuss how the passages relate to one another. In some cases, ease of readability will be an obvious difference, but other texts may show differences in viewpoints on social issues and other details. This exercise is not one with hard and fast right answers, and instructors should encourage whatever comments students come up with, while also ensuring that certain aspects are mentioned as relevant to the lesson.

After the students have been introduced to the scripts, live readings are another useful activity. Students can, either onstage or from their seats, read from the scripts to personally engage with the material, which may lead to additional insights, or at least more personal engagement, with the texts. These are not intended to be directed or done in a particular way, but are primarily to encourage that engagement from the students. If possible, allow different students to read for each role, in order to start discussion about different ways one might play the same character, and the different motivations one can bring out based on the text and the relationships within it.

Classroom Activities

Section 1

Theater and you: To start the unit, ask the students how much live theater they have seen. You can respond and track the answers verbally, or you can tally them into categories on the board. “Not much”, “several shows,” “Lots” would all be solid. Depending on the responses, ask further questions. The purpose here is to get students thinking about their own relationship to theater, as well as their communities’ relationship with it, or possibly lack thereof. As a secondary assignment, ask the kids to come up with a list of possible barrier between people and theater, as well as some ideas on how to address those barriers.

Romeo and Juliet: Building on the ideas from the previous lesson, have the kids read Act 2 Scene 2 of Romeo and Juliet, the famous balcony scene. Be prepared for questions regarding many of the words and phrases used, and I’d highly recommend reading through it yourself to look up any unfamiliar constructions in advance. Chances are, with all the breaks for explanations and discussion, this will take a while. It’s ok, as the confusion is something of the point at this stage of the exercise. By the end, the students should have a rough idea of what is happening in this portion of the show, and should be able to write a brief, modern language synopsis of the scene.

West Side Story: Act 1, Scene 5 of the Sondheim retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* covers the same territory of the plot as the excerpt they read the previous day. In this exercise, they will read the passage from *West Side Story*. Let them give their own thoughts on it before you enter into the question of readability. After discussing why one was easier to read/understand than the other, you can start to talk about other examples of this, including (but certainly not limited to) *Kiss me Kate* as an update of *Taming of the Shrew* or *Hadestown*

as an update of the myth of Orpheus, itself a very early example of Greek tragedy. To further reinforce this idea, a good activity would be to have them to take a page of Shakespearean dialogue and rewrite it into modern parlance, perhaps to then share it with other students.

Section 2

This section is more concerned with the history of various people groups throughout American history. Due to the demographics of my school, most of the examples provided will be specifically concerned with Black and Hispanic contributions to theater, but you should feel free to substitute demographic groups that are more relevant to your students, as required.

Racial depictions in Theater: To start with, warn the students that this can be a sensitive subject, and there will be opportunities to explore their thoughts on this subject matter in discussion. Then, introduce pictures of some blackface actors, such as Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer.* Allow the students to express their thoughts/feelings on the representation of a people group by people not of that group in such a stereotypical way. Then, show them the picture of Bert Williams, an African American performer, shown to the right. Discuss, if Al Jolson was in the wrong for acting in blackface, why would a black actor adopt many of the same stylings for his own performance? This can lead into a discussion of racial stereotypes in theater. There are other examples for most every other demographic being lampooned and caricatured in theater, particularly from the 1800's and early 1900's.

Bert Williams, African American star

Many actors felt that they had to adopt these caricatured personas in order to achieve success, and did so. Ask the students, was this an appropriate thing to do, or would refusing to engage with these stereotypes have been the better choice, even if it prevented them from having personal success?

Many voices: Building on the previous lesson, this lesson looks primarily at the mid-20th century, and shows such as *Raisin in the Sun* and *West Side Story*, as American theater starts to look more at minority communities. Playwrights in this era, both from inside of and outside of those communities, begin turning to them as examples of American society, distinct but not separate from American culture in general. *Raisin*, a show written by a black woman, and *West Side Story,* by a white man, should both be excerpted as a preview for a discussion by students regarding how they are similar and different in their depictions of nonwhite communities. This is also a good time to bring up a project that will last for several days/lessons. Students should select a minority theatrical figure (actor, director, playwright, etc.) and research and write a short essay about that figure and their contributions to American theater. You can provide a curated list to

students, or allow them to pick their own subject, per your approval.

Modern Theater: Show students appropriate excerpts from *In the Heights, Hamilton,* or the ballroom revival of *Cats.* How do these differ from the theater we've seen in previous lessons? Today, some of the biggest theatrical successes in both stage and screen are being written and produced by black and Hispanic creators. For their long term project that they started previously, encourage them to use this knowledge to connect the theatrical figure they selected to modern theater, and the contributions they made to get us to the point we are today. This is also a good time to talk a little about actors and creators like Andre De Shields or Lin-Manuel Miranda, and how casting in modern theater is increasingly unrestricted based on heritage, and that there are more opportunities than ever available to them and people in their communities.

Annotated Bibliography

For Instructors

Black Like You:Blackface, Whiteface, Insult, & Imitation in American Popular Culture: A historical study by John Strausbaugh, this book is a valuable reference for anyone who wants to learn more about the depictions of black Americans in American theater. It takes into account all of United States history, including the heyday of blackface minstrel shows, all the way into modern movies, and uses this pop cultural lens to help readers look further into how the various heritages of the United States' population both view and portray one another.

American Humor: A Study of the National Character by Constance Rourke: An older text, first printed in the early 20th Century, Rourke analyzes American literature and theater insofar as it had developed up to that point. In doing so, she draws out several character archetypes which she describes as uniquely American, part of the young nation's literary character. Of note for this course unit, Chapter 3 is primarily concerned with the archetype of the black character, further reinforcing the idea that African American characters and people have been part of the fabric of American culture from the very beginning.

For Students and Instructors

West Side Story by Jerome Robbins: A counterpart text to *Romeo and Juliet,* which takes the well known plot of Shakespeare's show and transplants it into a 20th century New York urban setting. This show re-envisions the feuding families of Verona into ethnic gangs as an excellent example of reframing and modernizing a classic story to be more accessible to modern audiences.

Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansbury: The first Broadway play written by a black woman, as well as the first by a black director, *Raisin* represents a seminal moment in American theatrical history, as well as dealing with several issues that students will likely still resonate with today.

In the Heights by Lin-Manuel Miranda: An earlier effort by a currently world-famous playwright, *In the Heights* is jam packed with relevant stories and themes to many children of immigrant families today. Of all the scripts it is suggested that students read excerpts from in this unit, this is probably the one I would cut last, if cuts are deemed necessary.

How the 'New World' Symphony Introduced American Music to Itself. By Tom Huizenga: An interesting article about the impact of Dvorak and African American music on American music in general.

From Bawdyhouse to Cabaret: The Evolution of the Tango as an Expression of Argentine Popular Culture by Deborah Jakubs: An academic article that was a valuable resource in studying the spread of the Argentinian tango.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards:

TEKS 4A: portray theatre as a reflection of life in particular times, places, and cultures;

This unit examines theater as a reflection of life throughout United States history, and how it reflects the various cultures and many of the events that have formed our nation.

TEKS 4E: appreciate the multicultural heritage of United States drama and theatre and identify key figures, works, and trends in dramatic literature;

Students will engage with theatrical works from various cultural groups from US history. They will also examine the works of key figures such as Lorraine Hansbury, Geoffrey Holder, and Lin-Manuel Miranda.

TEKS 4F: identify and appreciate the innovations and contributions of the United States to the performing arts such as theatre, melodrama, musical theatre, radio, film, television, technology, or electronic media.

Students will have several opportunities to engage with movie adaptations of stage shows, as well as look at how traditions in American stagecraft and performances have influenced other media.

Notes

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[1] Strausbaugh, *Black like you: blackface, whiteface, insult & imitation in American popular culture* 131

[2] William Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliet* Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles, eds (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed [7-16-2024]. https://folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/romeo-and-juliet/

[3] Robbins, Jerome, dir. 1957. *West Side Story,* Play.

[4] Rourke, Constance. *American humor: a study of the national character.* 77-104

[5] Strausbaugh, *Black like you: blackface, whiteface, insult & imitation in American popular culture* 62

[6] Ibid

[7] Ibid, 65

[8] Ibid, 123-125

[9] Huizenga, Tom. 2018. “How the ‘New World’ Symphony Introduced American Music to Itself.” NPR.org. November 24, 2018. https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2018/11/24/669557133/dvorak-new-world-symphony-american-anthem.

[10] Jakubs, Deborah L. 1984. “From Bawdyhouse to Cabaret: The Evolution of the Tango as an Expression of Argentine Popular Culture.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 18 (1): 133–45. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1984.1801_133.x.

[11] “A Look at Hispanic & Latinx Artists and Performers | the New York Public Library.” 2022. The New York Public Library. 2022. https://www.nypl.org/blog/2022/09/13/hispanic-latinx-artists-performers?utm_campaign=NYPLSocialMedia&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social.

[12] Hansberry, Lorraine. 2002. *A Raisin in the Sun : A Drama in Three Acts*. New York: Random House. https://khdzamlit.weebly.com/uploads/1/1/2/6/11261956/a_raisin_in_the_sun_-_lorraine_hansberry.pdf.

[13] “Geoffrey Holder.” n.d. The Official Masterworks Broadway Site. Accessed July 16, 2024. https://www.masterworksbroadway.com/artist/geoffrey-holder/.

[14] Quiara Alegría Hudes, Jill Furman, and Lin-Manuel Miranda. 2013. *In the Heights : The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical*. Milwaukee, Wi: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books.