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1990 Volume II: Contemporary American Drama: Scripts and Performance

The Preparation of a Play to be Performed before a School Audience

Curriculum Unit 90.02.05
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My curriculum unit will deal with the preparation of a play to be performed before a school audience. I work as a drama-dance instructor for the Comprehensive Arts program. I teach seventh and eighth graders in the New Haven public middle schools. Most of the schools I teach have either a racially mixed population or a population of predominantly African-American students. I know, based on my own experiences and also the experiences of my students, that the schools curriculum doesn't always meet the specific need of certain ethnic groups. For this reason, one of my major goals with this project is to select materials which will not only be age-appropriate for the levels I teach but will also provide a positive description of the image of African-American. I want the young actors' experience to be one which will make them proud of who they are, where they come from and where they are going.

The students should be able to relate to characters that don't fall into the stereotyped scheme most often displayed on television. Instead of playing the role of a drug-dealer or a prostitute, which they see quite frequently on television, they will play a role of a doctor, lawyer, or businessman.

The students see a great deal of crime in their everyday lives on television and on the street. They see drug-dealing, and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. With this in mind I would like to remove them from such harsh realities and expose them to another way of life.

I mentioned the fact that television does very little to help young African-American children feel happy with who they are. It is true that more is being done to help them now with television programs becoming more inclusive. But there are still many programs which reinforce the sambo image which stems from the roots of slavery. I was really troubled when I took a graduate course at Southern Connecticut state University and students in the class, who are currently teachers, felt there was nothing wrong with the book *Sambo*.

I was compelled to explain to them that the term *Sambo* came about during slavery because most whites felt that the natural traits of the Negro character were so deeply ingrained that they were immutable. Regardless of climate, condition, or circumstances the Negro retained his native African characteristics. Julien Virey, a Frenchman whose works were widely read in America, supported this view when he asserted: "All the facts which have been collected concur to prove how constant and indelible are the natural and moral characteristics of negroes in every climate, notwithstanding a diversity of circumstances, which condemn him to indolence and degradation." ¹

The students see these images so often that they don't believe it's possible for any other roles to exist. It was

very difficult for African-American to believe in the Cosby show. Both adults and children had a problem with it because they weren't used to seeing it on television. "How often do you see a black middle-class family that has parents who are a doctor and a lawyer," is the statement many African-American made, because these roles were untraditional roles for African American to play.

I'm not knocking the other African-American programs because they have paved the way for Bill Cosby. And there was a time when there were no black programs. Students would be more ready to accept Sanford and Son, The Jefferson, or Good Times before they would accept The Cosby show. These are shows I grew up watching and identifying with but this is not the only picture in the real lives of African-American.

If we want our children to have high aspiration in life we have to show them that they don't have to be a junkman or a maid but that they can be doctors and lawyers. They don't have to be prostitutes and drug-dealers. I am going to show them through theater that they can believe in Bill Cosby but also that they don't have to be ashamed of Sanford and Son. They have to be able to see both sides of the economic line. For this reason, it's going to be real important to select an excerpts that are realistic but not too real, positive without being too much fantasy, and on the reading level of the students I teach. Several suggestions have been made by my colleagues.

Background Information

Before reading and analyzing plays I will provide the students with background information in a condensed introduction to the theater. This will be followed by the history of theater. This background information will be very general to serve as a basic foundation.

The information will include the definition of theater and its purposes, the various genres and what makes each different, theater history with regard to African American theater.

The origin of African American theater is influenced by Sambo stereotypes, Jim Crow laws, and minstrelsy. Post slavery American theater shows how blacks were put on the defensive where they remain today because of Sambo imagery. We are going to take a close look at these influences. The plays ridiculed the features, the habits and the very being of the Negro. ²

I will discuss with the students Alexander Dumas, author of "Camille" and responsible for the "well made play".

We will discuss minstrels and how it was created by black slaves who satirized their slave masters. But when white troubadours witnessed minstrelsy they copied it by blackening their own faces and using it against the slaves to create and in turn in the American minds, the Negro as a Sambo.

We will discuss the many blacks who wrote anti-slavery plays and were chased because of it by the Ku Klux Klan. We will talk about the first blacks to have plays produced on Broadway that lasted a year. Lorraine Hansbury with "A Raisin in the Sun" and Langston Hughes with "Mulatto". ³

We will read from Loftin Mitchell's "Voices of Black Theater". From this great book we will study the experiences of theatrical pioneers Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, and Paul Robeson. We will get to hear their conflicts and battles and how they overcame them because of their love for the theater and also because they knew they would affect the future of African American theater.

We can then move up to present day theater and discuss the many greats they watch on television and in the

movies. An extensive amount of biographical information about present day African American stars can be found in “Ebony Magazine” and “Essence”. Both are African American magazines which praise the accomplishments of African American in theater. And both magazines also discuss the many conflicts the actors had to face.

Once the foundation is laid I will make theater more real for the students by providing them with information about famous African-American actors of today. I will discuss actors and actresses they have seen on television and are capable of relating to. I would discuss actors and actresses like Sammy Davis Jr., Ciceley Tyson, James Earl Jones, Sidney Poitier, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, Redd Foxx and many others. This will help me to make the connection between theater and something they relate to everyday, which is television.

If at all possible it would be tremendously valuable if the students could have a field trip which would expose them to live theater. Fortunately we have many great theaters right here in New Haven.

We have the Long Wharf Theater, The Yale Repertory theater, Lyman Auditorium, The Shubert theater, the Yale Dramat, and The Afro-American Cultural Center at Yale. After seeing a professional or semi-professional performance it would also be nice if they could see a play with student actors their age. A colleague of mine even suggested an exchange where students perform for one another once they have reached a certain point in their training.

Following the theater history would be the theater terminology and stage-direction. Not only will it be easier to communicate to other students when giving direction but they will also have a sense of professionalism when they can understand and use the “lingo”. With the stage direction they will learn stage-right, stage-left, upstage, and downstage.

Once the students have walked through the direction a few times they can be tested to see how much they can remember on their own.

We will discuss stage areas, body position, stage movement, lines and dialogue. ⁴

Theater Games

Theater games are very useful in the beginning stages of exposing children to the theater. Games have a way of breaking barriers and causing students to become more comfortable around one another. There are games to relax like the ‘massage train’ where the students stand one behind another giving the person in front of them a shoulder massage. This will release tension and eliminate fear of touching one another.

Another exercise which promotes concentration is the ‘mirroring game’, students are paired and one is assigned as the leader while the other student follows. The leader moves slowly in various motion while the follower imitates the motion simultaneously. This is an exercise which requires concentration because it should be difficult to know who is initiating the movement.

An exercise for increasing energy is “Hide and Seek”. Of course this depend on the amount of space a classroom has. One person is chosen to count while hiding his eyes an the others have to hide. When the designated person has finished counting they must then try to find the students who are hiding and tag them before they reach home. The last person caught is it.

The Selection of a play

Because the students I work with are not all on the seventh and eighth grade reading level I will use more than one play. I will simply use excerpts as opposed to using the entire play, which will allow me more freedom to edit the materials.

The length of the excerpts must also be taken into consideration when selecting pieces because the students can become very frustrated when trying to memorize lengthy monologues. This would depend on the individual abilities of the students. For some students it would be a welcome challenge.

In trying to discover materials the students can relate to I will select some materials which use a minimal amount of slang. But if all the selection contained slang I would be guilty of reinforcing the Sambo imagery. I think it's all right if the language isn't condescending and making the characters appear to be ignorant. Slang can be used along with proper grammar so that valuable lessons taught by English teachers aren't lost.

There are some plays that I feel are partially appropriate so that excerpts would be useful. The plays are "Runaways", by Samuel French and, "For Colored Girls", by Ntozake Shange.

Because some of the subject matter in these plays would not be acceptable in Junior high I will use my own discretion on selecting excerpts. One possibility would be allowing students to read plays and stories and then write their own plays based on their readings. Anne Magda, a drama teacher for the Comprehensive Arts program, did a magnificent program using this strategy.

It was called American Folk Heroes and she managed to cater to every ethnic group. She read folk-tales aloud to her class and allowed the students to select a story to write a play about. This works very well because the students are writing on their own level in a language they are capable of understanding. They also get to have a choice in the type of play they would like to do. Not only did her performance go very well but the students also received awards in the Yale Children's Dramat Contest. You could just imagine how proud the students and their parents must have felt to receive such recognition.

The way I would use this method is I would read the plays with students and have them write their own plays based on what they've read. I will also show video of "The Cosby Show" and "Different World". They would then write plays based on what they've seen.

I will tell them to be very careful with grammar and I would allow them to use a minimal amount of slang as long as it's not offensive. Example: I would not let them use the word nigga because it's offensive and derogatory term. I would let them use the slang expression "fresh" which means admirable. The students will have to include the six elements of a play which are plot, characters, climax, conflict, theme, and denouement. Of course the play would have to have more dialogue than narration. I will suggest they know the plot first. Then they could develop characters and then work on other elements of the play. I will also inform them that a play has a beginning, a middle and an end. It would be good if they included stage directions but this aspect of the play could be developed in a later stage. The students can also know that a climax is something which builds so that it wouldn't be wise to have the climax at the beginning of the play.

Reading and Interpreting the Excerpts

When reading the excerpts I will have the students take turns reading aloud having been assigned a particular character.

It's not good to force a student who is reluctant to read because chances are they will be so embarrassed they might refuse to ever attempt it again. Good readers shouldn't be allowed to monopolize parts either because all the students need to practice reading aloud.

After reading the excerpt we'll discuss the six elements of a play which are:

Plot—What happens in a play.

Characters—People in the play

Climax—The highest point of the play.

Conflict—Major problem in the play.

Theme—The main idea.

Denouement—The solution. ⁵

Once students have an understanding of the six elements they will independently write the six elements with regard to the excerpts they've read. This will be followed by a discussion of their answers.

If they read the poem "Sorry" from "Colored Girls" they will apply the six elements to the excerpt. Example:

Who were the characters? The lady in blue.

What was the climax? When she said I loved you on purpose.

What was theme? A woman can survive alone.

What was the conflict? She was in love with a man who wasn't good for her.

What was the plot? A lady is fed up with apologies and she tells the man off.

What is the denouement? She leaves him.

Auditioning

At this point the students are prepared to begin auditioning and taking directions. Because this is an educational experience the students who can benefit most from having a part will receive it.

If I feel a particular character has similar personality traits I will cast him for the part. I might also base my choice on the possibility of a student learning a valuable lesson through experiencing what the character

experiences. If a person tries hard and doesn't receive a major role he can always be assigned the responsibility of stage director, assistant director, or an extra in certain scenes. But it's best not to excluded anyone because they will feel left out and become a distraction.

Understanding Character

With the excerpts cast and having already read through the excerpts a few times we will begin to work on character. The actors in contributing to the production must look inside themselves in order to create the external image he wishes to convey to the audience. The actor must relate to past experiences and the experiences of others so that the part can be real for them and the audience. ⁴

The actor must play himself bringing to life a character inspired by his inner resources. In creating a character it's important to look at the script and say what do I want and what will I do to get it? These two questions will define the character's personality and also define the character's action. Thus will find the actor's motivating forces and intention. ⁵

This is another written assignment which can be followed by a discussion:

- a. What does the character do?
- b. What does the character say?
- c. What does the main character say about him?
- d. What actions are suggested in the lines?
- e. What comments and descriptions does the playwright offer in the stage directions. ⁶

Action and Blocking

We'll then work on blocking the production. By this time students should have their own copy of the scripts. Each student will be responsible for remembering their directions. Once the directions are about set the use of props should begin. Some directors says props should be used from the beginning but I feel this interrupts the students' concentration on the blocking and the lines.

In preparing a production concept I will work on cutting for length, changes to simplify staging, adjustments for shape and focus, and indications of possible major cues. ⁷

A versatile set will have to be designed and I would prefer to use as simple a set as possible. I would like to concentrate more on the students' abilities as opposed to masking their talents with make-up and overdone sets. The set will be fairly universal with minor set changes.

The lighting, due to minimal budget, will be stationary lights.

The selection of costume in most scenes will be everyday wear for the actors and leotards, tights, and specialty costumes for certain roles.

I would like to have a week of full dress rehearsals which would amount to approximately ten hours total for dress rehearsal.

This is how the schedule will look:

Week #1—Introduction to theater

Week #2—Read thru of excerpts

Week #3—Analyzing the excerpts

Week #4—Blocking

Week #5—Rehearsal

Week #6—Dress Rehearsal

Week #7—Performance

Here's an example of how the process for preparation in keeping with the elimination of the Sambo stereotype would work. I will demonstrate with the use of video presentation of "The Cosby Show", which would be rewritten by the students in the class. We could start off with a Cosby show that deals with Vanessa dating for the first time.

Before I could cast the Cosby show we would have to view the excerpt and then rewrite it. Once it is turned into a play we can read it through in class. I would then cast the play according to who is most suitable for the part of Vanessa, Robert, Rudy, Cliff, Claire, and Theo. They would simply have to show that they are capable of displaying the kind of emotions the characters possess. Other students can be included in the scene as party goers.

All that is required for the set would be a living-room which has been cleared of furniture for a Halloween party and a kitchen with a table and chairs. An extensive amount of props because it's a realistic scene.

In this scene Vanessa has to be convinced by her parents and her sister to have confidence to face the boy she likes at her party. And at the end she finds it in herself to do so.

There are many positive elements in this scene because first of all Vanessa is a young girl having a party with no alcohol and her parents are in the next room. She is very easy to relate to because she is an adolescent who is beginning to date.

Once the lines have been memorized and the blocking has been set which would have been derived from the lines we will work on costuming. None of the characters in the Huxtable family would wear lots of gold or tightly fitted clothing. At this scene the students would be wearing costumes. Although some African American youth wear gold because of fad I would like to place less emphasis on that materialistic side of them and deal more with their emotions.

We would have a week of dress rehearsals following the memorizing of lines, blocking, and use of props. After that would be show time.

Lesson #1

Objective To work on pronunciation, breathing control, and projection.

Directions Have students read aloud at a fast, medium and slow pace. Then have the students read at a loud volume and follow with a low volume.

1. Peter Piper picked a peck of pickle peppers
A peck of pickle peppers Peter Piper picked
If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickle peppers
Where's the peck of pickle peppers Peter Piper picked
2. Billy Button baked a bunch of butter brownies
A bunch of butter brownies Billy Button baked
If Billy Button baked a bunch of butter brownies
Where's the bunch of butter brownies Billy Button baked

Lesson #2

Objective To get students to interact and become familiar with one another. It will also cause students to look at themselves.

Directions Break up the class into couples. Mix the students so they are someone they don't know. Have the couple ask one another a series of personal questions. Each person must record the answers and share them with the class.

1. Who are you?

2. What do you want?
3. What good qualities do you possess?
4. What are your hobbies?
5. Who are your favorite entertainers?
6. What do you want to be when you grow up?

Lesson #3

Objective To teach students the stage directions.

Directions Have students read the directions aloud. After reading each direction have another student demonstrate the direction. After reading all the direction have them complete a quiz on stage directions.

1. Blocking—The directors' arrangement of the actors' movements on stage with respect to one another and the stage space.
2. Out—Away from the center of the stage.
3. Upstage—Away from the audience.
4. Downstage—Toward the audience.
5. Wings—Offstage space at the right and left of the acting areas.
6. Stageleft—The actors left as he stands onstage facing the audience.
7. In—Toward the center of the stage.
8. Stageright—The actor's right as he stands on stage facing the audience.
9. Onstage—The parts of the stage enclosed by the setting that is visible to the audience³ in any particular scene.
10. Offstage—All parts of the stage not enclosed by the setting.

Notes

1. John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* , p.229.
2. Lofton Mitchell, *Voices of Black Theater*, p.218.
3. Ibid.
4. C. McGaw and L. Clark, *Acting is Believing*, pp 4-5.
5. Robert Benedetti, *The Director at Work* , p. 63.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

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