

STAGE LEFT

DIVERSE THEATERS
CURRICULUM GUIDE



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Teatro Campesino. Photo provided by Rapt Productions.

OVERVIEW

This guide is designed to accompany the segments of *STAGE LEFT* about theaters rooted in the experiences of diverse ethnic and racial communities. These companies include El Teatro Campesino, the Black Repertory Group Theatre, Black Arts/West, the Lorraine Hansberry Theater, and the Asian American Theater Company. A number of women's theater companies were also part of the theater scene, including Lilith Theater and Brava for Women in the Arts.

BACKGROUND & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Historical and Cultural Context: The United Farmworkers (UFW) and Chicano Theater

Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta co-founded the UFW, a union designed to protect the rights of immigrant farmworkers, in 1962. The union officially adopted the principles of non-violence used by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. From 1965-1970, the UFW led the Delano Grape Strike, which included a workers' strike, and a consumer boycott of the growers of California grapes. The strike was a significant victory for the UFW, leading to a first contract with these growers.

During the 1960s the Chicano Pride movement also grew. Chicano (or Xicano) originally was a derogatory term used for sons and daughters of Mexican migrants whose identity was marked by the border, seen on both sides as not American, but not Mexican either. The term has evolved into a symbol of self-determination and ethnic pride. Chicano Theater, which developed along with the Chicano Pride movement, is widely viewed to have been founded by Luis Valdez. A student activist whose influences included Brecht and Cantinflas (an actor known for his physical comedy and portrayal of downtrodden characters, often referred to as the "Charlie Chaplin of Mexico"), Valdez briefly joined the San Francisco Mime Troupe, before deciding to use the tools of popular theater to support the UFW's struggle for immigrant workers' rights.

DIVERSE THEATERS CURRICULUM GUIDE

Valdez founded El Teatro Campesino in 1965. Valdez tailored El Teatro's work to its audience: he created largely improvised one-act plays, called *actos*, and performed them on the UFW picket lines, on flatbed trucks in the fields, and at union meetings. In other words, he brought theater that reflected issues impacting farmworkers to where the farmworkers worked. Teatro's performances drew from *commedia dell'arte* as well as Mexican drama and ritual traditions. In 1970, El Teatro Campesino settled in San Juan Batista, California, a small town south of San Francisco near the agricultural regions of Watsonville and Salinas.

In 1977, a Rockefeller Foundation grant enabled Valdez to create the play *Zoot Suit* for the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. *Zoot Suit* played to critical and popular acclaim and became the first play by a Latino playwright to be produced on Broadway.

The African American Community in San Francisco and Black Theater

The African American population of San Francisco was very small until World War II. At that time, it increased significantly due to African American migration to San Francisco and other regions in the Bay Area, including Richmond, to work in the shipyards and other defense industries. Many settled in the Hunter's Point neighborhood, and when Japanese Americans in San Francisco were placed in internment camps, African Americans began moving into the Fillmore district and the Western Addition.

With the end of World War II, many African Americans in San Francisco lost the jobs they held during the War, which led to an unemployment rate of 30%. The San Francisco Civil Rights Movement, which grew out of these difficult economic conditions, based its strategy on the Southern Civil Rights movement and other freedom struggles, and staged a series of protests designed to increase African American employment after the war. Continued frustration with a high unemployment rate and lack of opportunity resulted in many African American activists in San Francisco becoming more militant and embracing the Black Power movement. This movement, which gained strength in the mid- to late 1960s, was a result of the frustration some individuals within the African American community had with the non-violent tactics and integrationist goals of the Civil Rights movement. At the center of the Black Power movement was the Black Panther Party, which was formed in 1966. The Black Panthers had a militant and socialist approach that emphasized supporting and strengthening the community from within. These values led to the establishment of initiatives such as the free breakfast program in African American neighborhoods.

The Black Arts Movement was the artistic branch of Black Power, embodying and generating pride in African American identity in a society that had been dominated by white artistic and cultural traditions. Writer Amiri Baraka was one of the figureheads of the movement, which started in New York and spread throughout the country. Ed Bullins, a playwright who briefly served as the Black Panthers' Minister of Culture, and playwright Marvin X founded Black/Arts West in 1966. Actor Danny Glover performed in Black/Arts West's productions. Marvin X, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bullins established Black House, a political and cultural center in the Western Addition. Black House became

DIVERSE THEATERS CURRICULUM GUIDE

a center for those who learned black consciousness through the arts; many who passed through the building were also affiliated with the Black Panthers.

During this time period, a number of other African American theaters sprung up. In Berkeley, Nora Vaughn founded The Black Repertory Group in 1964 as a church drama club. Since that time, the BRG has produced one-act plays by a number of local playwrights and developed a successful youth program.

The Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, founded in 1981, is named after the acclaimed playwright of *A Raisin in the Sun*, who wrote the play while living in the Bay Area. The theater has mounted more than 100 plays by notable black playwrights and authors, including Ntozake Shange, August Wilson, Robert Alexander, and Langston Hughes. In 1988, the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre moved from the storefront it started in to a 300-seat theater in downtown San Francisco. In 2007, the Theater was forced to move when the Academy of Art took over its building; therefore it began co-producing plays with companies such as the Marin Theatre and ACT.

The Emergence of Asian American Theater and AATC

American theater in the 1950s featured a number of Asian characters, but they frequently perpetuated racial stereotypes and were often played by white actors made up as Asian. In the 1960s, Asian American actors and writers began to form activist organizations both to create artistic opportunities for themselves and to promote positive, non-stereotypical images of Asian people. These groups included the New York group Oriental Actors of America, who regularly protested openings of shows with white actors playing Asian characters. In Los Angeles, a group of actors founded the East West Players (EWP) in 1965. The EWP actors first used their company as a means to showcase their talent for television and film producers and directors, but by the early 1970s, EWP began to actively sponsor original plays by Asian Americans.

Frank Chin, whose play *The Chickencoop Chinaman* was the first Asian American play to be produced in New York, founded the Asian American Theater Company (AATC) in 1973. The AATC became a professional theater company dedicated to producing plays by Asian American dramatists and supporting Asian American actors, designers and technicians, and moved into a space in the Richmond District. By 1989, the company had premiered more than 35 plays by Asian American playwrights. One of the most prominent of this group is David Henry Hwang, whose play *F.O.B.* won several major awards. Hwang became the first Asian American playwright to win a Tony Award, for his play *M. Butterfly*. Other prominent artists include playwrights Philip Kan Gotanda, Rick Shiomi and actor Lane Nishikawa. AATC is currently in residence at the Thick House theater in San Francisco's Potrero Hill.

DIVERSE THEATERS CURRICULUM GUIDE

The Women's Movement and Women's Theater

In the 1960s and 1970s, the women's movement, often described as second wave feminism, sought greater social, economic, and political equality for women. During this period, women organized consciousness-raising groups and collectives as a way of creating solidarity and fighting for equality. In consciousness-raising groups, women had the space to talk about topics that impacted their lives and a vehicle to feel both empowered and encouraged to work with other women to engage in political action. Women also organized collectives, or groups organized around the equal cooperation and input of all members. The lesbian feminist movement, a branch of the women's movement that started in the early 1970s, confronted the idea that heterosexuality was the accepted norm in society. These two movements generated a strong community of feminist artists in San Francisco. In 1974, Terry Baum, Charlotte Colavin and Shelley Fields founded The Lilith Theater. Lilith, like many women's theaters during that time, was a collective. They created a collaborative process of making their work drawn from the consciousness circles and democratic modes of communication used in the feminist movement; the content focused on issues impacting women. Notable plays included *Moonlighting*, *Manifesto*, and *Sacrifices*. Some of the women who performed with Lilith included Joan Mankin, Joan Holden, Paula Poundstone, Marga Gomez, and Rhodessa Jones. After many shifts in membership and many productions, Lilith closed its doors in 1986.

The Mothertongue Feminist Theater Collective was formed in 1976 with the intent of addressing women's roles in society, lesbianism, motherhood, disability, and other topics. Mothertongue had a non-hierarchical structure and did not use directors; women offering critique and support of other women's writing were seen as a "third eye." Collective members reading their work were given equal billing for performances. The collective is still meeting and producing work.

In 1986, a group of San Francisco women artists met to discuss producing high-quality theater that spoke to the diversity of women's experiences. As a result, playwright Ellen Gavin founded Brava! for Women in the Arts. Since that time, Brava! has produced plays by well-known female playwrights including Cherrie Moraga, Amy Mueller, Jewelle Gomez, and Ellen Sebastian Chang. Brava! also has produced dozens of award winning premieres by playwrights such as Diana Son, Eve Ensler, Suzan-Lori Parks, Joan Holden, and Anne Galjour. Brava has also launched a number of youth theater projects, including the Drama Divas for LGBTQ youth of color and the San Francisco Running Crew, a training program in technical theater for young people.



David Henry Hwang's F.O.B., Asian American Theater Company

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

1. Review the background and historical context with students. Have them consider the following question as they watch the segment of Stage Left:
 - What unique role did theater play in the Chicano Pride, Black Power, Asian American identity and feminist and lesbian feminist movements?
2. Discuss the definition of marginalized community with the class. Make a class list of examples of marginalized communities. As students watch the Stage Left segment, ask them to reflect on Luis Valdez's statement that in theater, marginalized people are "represented with their own complete humanity and then move the whole margin forward."
 - How does theater created by, for and about marginalized people impact that community? What impact can it have on the predominant economic and cultural power structure of a society?

POST-VIEWING REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How did the structures and goals of women's theater groups reflect the ideals of the feminist movement?
2. How has theater addressed social issues that marginalized communities face?

DIVERSE THEATERS CURRICULUM GUIDE

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Audiovisuals:

Excerpts of Stage Left

<http://stageleft-movie.com/educators/excerpts/>

Diverse Theaters - Stage Left

<https://vimeo.com/62657248>

Interview with Luis Valdez

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdelwysKwJM>

A special report about the play Zoot Suit with historical context

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZOXoBRVtjg>

An excerpt from "Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtnJQ6eV5rk>

KQED This Week in Northern California segment about the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMnZbUW0azY>

KQED SPARK segment about Asian-American playwright Philip Kan Gotanda

<http://www.kqed.org/arts/programs/spark/profile.jsp?essid=16080>

A video about Brava Theater's Glass to Diamonds project for young women

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AwmXwEe_-4&feature=Bfa&list=UUfOUX_yD1kZ7-TsrKqA8njA

Websites:

Stage Left

<http://stageleft-movie.com>

Interactive timeline of Bay Area theater history

<http://stageleft-movie.com/timeline/>

El Teatro Campesino's website

<http://www.elteatrocampesino.com/>

A history of the Black Arts Movement

<http://aalbc.com/authors/blackartsmovement.htm>

The Lorraine Hansberry Theatre's website

<http://lhstf.org/>

Asian American Theater Company's website

<http://www.asianamericantheater.org/>

DIVERSE THEATERS CURRICULUM GUIDE

THEATER ACTIVITIES

Performance and Community Identity

Prep Activity: Share the definition of ritual with students and ask the class to share examples of rituals present in their family and community (based on what community means to them: it could be based on ethnicity or culture, religion, geography). Some examples of the range of responses: “My mother makes tortillas every Saturday morning,” or “We celebrate the eight days of Hanukkah by lighting candles and offering prayers,” or “On the Fourth of July my neighbors come together for a barbeque.” Then ask students to think of ritual as performance: a series of tasks and movements that are repeated, and whose repetition creates meaning. Ritual performances can be present in everyday life, in the way people communicate, celebrate, worship and eat, among many other things.

Ritual Gesture: Ask students to observe ritual performances in their families and communities, making detailed notes about what they observe. Have each student choose a ritual they observed and ask them to describe it using the five senses: what do you see, hear, taste, smell and touch? Then ask students to create a gesture (a movement with a beginning, middle and end) for the ritual that incorporates at least two of the senses and brings in words or phrases from their writing. For example, the gesture of a student’s mother making tortillas could include the slapping sound of flattening the dough and the movement she makes when she puts the tortillas on the fogon, with the line, “filled the kitchen with the sweet smell of warm maize...”

Communal Ritual Gestures: Once students have created their gestures, have them perform them all at once, and then keep repeating their gestures as they look around the room to find at least two other students with gestures that are similar to theirs, either because of the type of movement, the words spoken, or any other element. Once the class has broken into groups, ask each group to combine the gestures into one group piece that retains aspects of each group member’s gesture, but also brings out the commonalities.

Theatre of the Oppressed Exercises: Forum Theater, Cop in the Head, Rainbow of Desire

Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed exercises are useful in exploring the dynamics between people in situations of oppression or unequal power between people. These dynamics often come into play during struggles to assert personal identity. The following are some of Boal’s most famous exercises that provide ways to use theater to articulate personal identity. A simplified version of Forum Theater is outlined in this guide: more complete descriptions of Cop in the Head and Rainbow of Desire can be found in Boal’s book *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (Routledge, 1995). **Prep Activity:** Introduce the definition of tableau, and then have students form pairs. Ask them to shake hands with each other and freeze, as if their action has been paused. Have them share ideas about what an audience member could see if they were looking at this tableau: two friends greeting each other, a business deal, etc.

DIVERSE THEATERS CURRICULUM GUIDE

Complete the Image: Have the pairs of students shake hands and freeze to form a tableau. Then ask one student to remain frozen while the other moves into a frozen shape that creates a different tableau (have students think about levels and proximity as ways to make the tableau different). Then have the student who was frozen move and freeze to form yet another tableau. Then have students go back and forth spontaneously to form a series of tableaux. After a few minutes, ask them what they noticed about the kinds of tableaux they were making.

Creating a Forum Theater Scene: Introduce the concept of Forum Theater: an interactive form of theater where performers and audience work together to find solutions to a situation of power imbalance and conflict.

Share the key elements of a Forum Theater scene with students:

- **Will**—The central character in the scene, or protagonist, must want something that is necessary for him/her.
- **Obstacle**—There must be something that keeps the protagonist from getting what he/she wants, and this obstacle must be embodied by a character or characters.
- **Chinese Crisis**—Based on the popular, but not completely true, belief that the Chinese character for “crisis” is composed of the characters for “danger” and “opportunity.” Nonetheless it is a useful concept for Forum Theater. The scene should focus on a conflict that involves both danger and opportunity for the protagonist.

Break students into groups of four or five. Ask each group member to briefly share a real-life experience where they felt stuck, lacking choices, or unable to get what they wanted in a situation. This experience should involve an imbalance of power between the protagonist and another character or characters. Then, based on the elements of a of a Forum Theater scene, ask the group to choose one student’s story as the basis for their scene.

The first step is to have the student whose story was chosen (the protagonist) “sculpt” a group tableau illustrating the conflict point of the story, or the moment when the conflict between the protagonist and the other characters reach a crisis point. Using this tableau as a guide, have students create a short (1-2 minute) scene dramatizing the events that lead up to the conflict point.

Forum Performance: The key role in Forum Theater performance is the Joker. The Joker’s role is to facilitate the interactive Forum performance and support both the actors and the audience in using the tools of theater to try out solutions addressing the conflict presented. The following is a guide to facilitating a Forum performance:

Explain to the students in the audience that their role is to help the protagonist find ways to get what he or she wants in the scene. They will watch this scene once, and then when it is performed a second time, can stop the action when they think there is an opportunity to intervene on the protagonist’s behalf. They will step in and become the protagonist in the scene, “trying out” a possible

DIVERSE THEATERS CURRICULUM GUIDE

solution to the conflict with the other characters. In Boal's terms, they will be "spect-actors."

Have a group perform its scene once, and then have it begin performing the scene a second time, letting students in the audience know that they can stop the action at any time and try a solution.

When a spect-actor stops the action, ask him or her to replace the protagonist and have that person restart the scene from whatever point he/she chooses. When it's clear that the new solution has been played out, stop the action and ask the spect-actor, the other characters, and the protagonist some questions to determine how effective the solution was:

Spect-actor: What did you try as a solution? Did it work?

Other characters: Did this new solution change your behavior or thoughts about the conflict? Why or how?

Protagonist: Did this solution seem effective? Would you be able to try it?

Ask the protagonist to step back into his/her role in the scene, and continue playing the scene to solicit a few more solutions to the conflict. To conclude, ask the group to play the scene all the way through, this time with the protagonist using the solutions that have been presented to him/her.

This process can be followed by a group discussion about the dynamics of the conflict presented and ways that dynamic could be shifted in a positive direction.

Cop in the Head: Have the protagonist devise a scene where he or she felt unable to act due to issues with his/her personal identity, and identify all of the "cops" or voices in his/her head. Other students then become the cops by creating a frozen image and monologue that embodies that particular cop. The protagonist then chooses useful and not useful cops and "does battle with" the difficult cops and employs the useful cops as allies.

Rainbow of Desire: Similar to Cop in the Head except that the protagonist identifies the range, or "rainbow" of distinct fears and desires that come into play in their situation. Other students then embody these fears and desires and the protagonist identifies which are hardest or easiest to deal with and engages the difficult ones in dialogue. He or she then uses this information to re-improvise the original scene and see what changes occur.

Marginalized Community: A group of people completely or mostly left out of the predominant economic and cultural power structure in a society. For a list of additional definitions, search “marginalize” on google.com

Ritual: A ceremony, religious or secular, which has a prescribed form or an established procedure or routine.

Gesture: A movement with a beginning, middle, and end, that creates meaning not necessarily connected to the text of a play. A gesture can express meaning in a less literal way, and can also show emotional state.

Protagonist: The leading character or one of the major characters in a play; the central figure or one of the most prominent figures in a real situation (this is how it is defined for Theatre of the Oppressed).

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