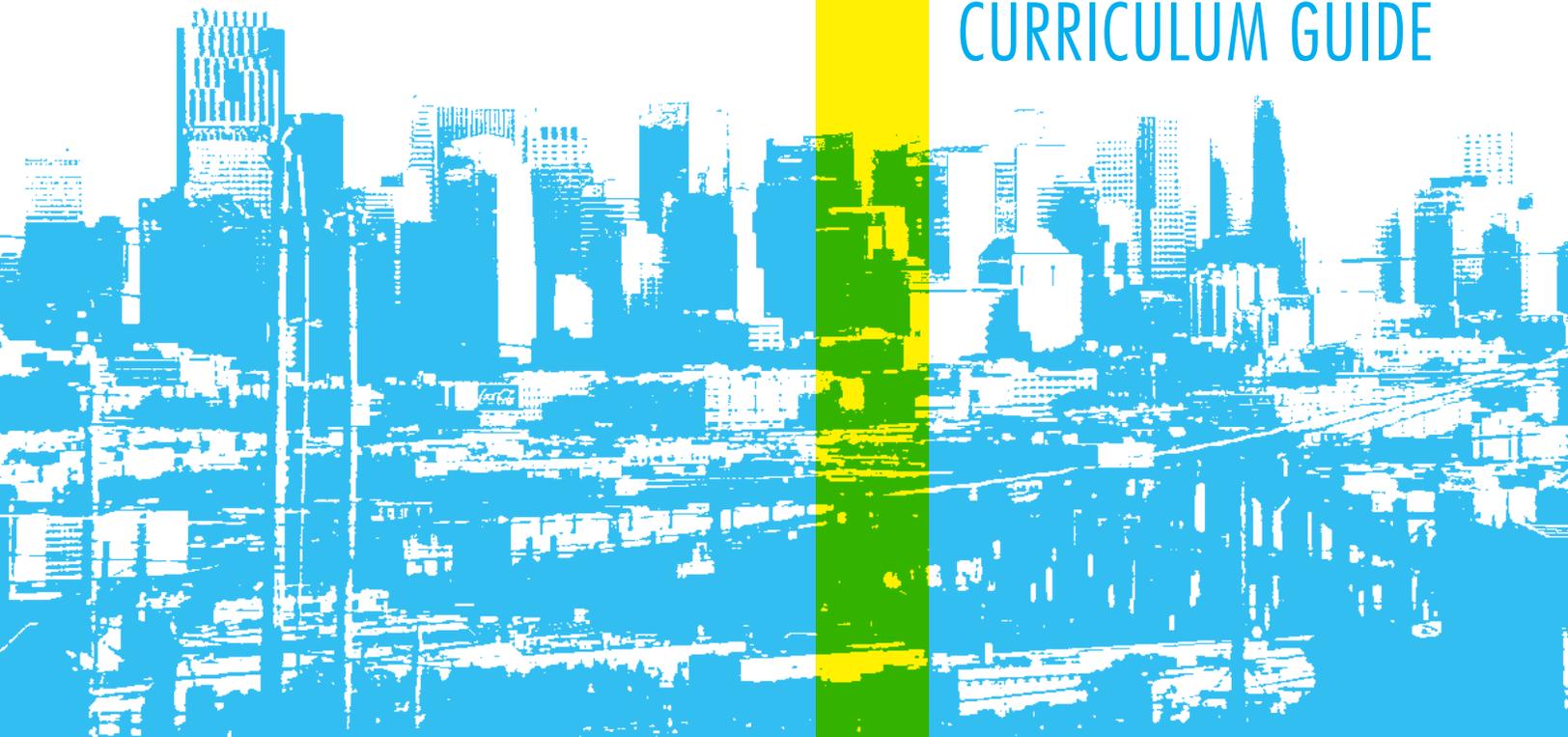




STAGE LEFT

LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL
& TRANSGENDER THEATERS
CURRICULUM GUIDE





Hibiscus, Angels of Light. Photo: Winters

OVERVIEW

This guide is designed to accompany the segments of *STAGE LEFT* about the Gay Mens' Theater Collective, the Cockettes, the Angels of Light, Theater Rhinoceros and the play *Angels in America*. These companies were founded in the late 1960s and 1970s, the time in the United States when the gay rights movement emerged and became more visible. The aesthetics and values of these companies reflected a newfound sense of "gay liberation" and represented the first time that the experiences of LGBT people were portrayed openly onstage. In the early 1980s, the AIDS epidemic hit and companies such as Theater Rhinoceros responded by developing plays about the epidemic. The impact of AIDS on the gay community was brought to the forefront of American theater with the world premiere of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* at the Eureka Theater in 1991.

BACKGROUND & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

[A Brief History of the Gay Rights Movement and Gay San Francisco](#)

Even though ideas of acceptance of homosexual people were present in American and European discourse as early as the 19th century, life for gay men and lesbians for most of the 20th century in the United States usually meant being "in the closet," or not openly revealing or acknowledging of their sexual orientation for fear of social stigmatization or even violence.

Life for gay men and lesbians was particularly difficult in the 1950s and early 1960s, the period after World War II. Following the social upheaval of the war, many people in the United States wanted to restore the "social order" that preceded it. This period was marked by the prevailing norm of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family distinguished by clearly defined gender roles for men and women. At the political level, the government held hearings to target suspected communists and other "subversive" elements of American society, including homosexuals. Gay men and lesbians risked losing their jobs and experiencing other forms of social ostracism. Furthermore, in 1952, homosexuality was included as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental

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Disorders, the manual used by the American Psychological Society to diagnose and treat mental illness. All of these factors contributed to gay men and lesbians living with deep shame and fear.

During this period, gay men or lesbians meeting publicly in bars risked constant police raids, which resulted in patrons being arrested and sometimes “outed” to their communities. However, on June 27, 1969, patrons of a gay bar in New York’s Greenwich Village, the Stonewall Inn, fought back during a police raid, sparking three days of riots. The Stonewall Riots are often viewed as the beginning of the modern gay rights movement (sometimes called the gay liberation movement). A year later, a parade organized in New York to commemorate the riots became the nation’s first Gay Pride parade.

San Francisco began attracting many LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) people in the 1970s, particularly in the Castro district. The combination of the countercultural lifestyles that emerged in the 1960s and the increased sense of freedom and visibility for the gay community that came with the gay rights movement resulted in a flourishing of gay culture.

The Cockettes and Angels of Light

The Cockettes were founded by Hibiscus (George Harris, Jr.) in the late 1960s. The group used drag performance, with its elaborate and gender-bending costumes and flamboyant performance style, to create and perform raucous shows, often fueled by the psychedelic drugs popular at the time. A Cockettes show included nudity, lots of glitter, and unpolished, spontaneous performance. Its work and principles (the group usually performed for free and some members lived in the KaliFlower commune, which gave out free food) were directly aligned with both the counterculture movement of the late 1960s and gay liberation.

In 1971, some members of the Cockettes who wanted to maintain the philosophy of freely giving performances to the community (a practice the group was moving away from) split off and started the Angels of Light. The Angels, like the Cockettes, lived in a communal household, living off welfare, but gave free food to the community. The Angels performances were as elaborate as the Cockettes and drew from world performance traditions such as Asian theatrical forms.

Theater Rhinoceros and The New Conservatory Theatre

Theatre Rhinoceros, the world’s oldest continuously performing gay theater, was founded in 1977. “The Rhino” produced plays by New York and San Francisco-based gay and lesbian playwrights, including Terrence McNally and Pat Bond. In 1984, following the death of Allan B. Estes, the theater’s founder, from AIDS, The Rhino produced *The AIDS Show: Artists Involved with Death and Survival*, a play co-authored by twenty San Francisco Bay Area artists. This play was the first work by any theater company in the nation to deal with the AIDS epidemic, and brought The Rhino national attention. The show ran for two years and toured the United States. The Rhino produced plays about AIDS throughout the 1980s and continues the tradition of mirroring contemporary LGBT experience with its productions to this day.

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In 1981, Ed Decker founded The New Conservatory Theatre as a small theater conservatory for low-income youth. In 1986, as a response to the AIDS epidemic, Decker created the YouthAware Touring Educational Theatre program, which aimed to use theater to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS. Since that time, New Conservatory has produced dozens of plays about the LGBT experience and expanded the YouthAware program to include plays about homophobia and other health issues impacting young people.

The AIDS Epidemic and AIDS Activism

At the beginning of the 1980s, a new, fatal disease emerged that appeared to primarily effect gay men and intravenous drug users. By the time the name AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) was used to describe the disease in 1982, one to two cases were being diagnosed in the country per day.

When the government of President Ronald Reagan failed to respond to the growing crisis, non-governmental and activist groups emerged to address it. The rallying cry of these groups, including ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Release Power), was “Silence=Death.” ACT UP began staging theatrical protests, including “die ins,” at government buildings and co-opting the pink triangle that had been used to identify homosexuals in the Nazi concentration camps as a symbol.

By 1989, more than 100,000 cases of AIDS had reported. AIDS had a significant, tragic impact on the San Francisco arts community. Many members of the Cockettes and Angels of Light, and innumerable other gay theater artists, died of the disease.

Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes

Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning two-part play had its world premiere at San Francisco’s Eureka Theater in 1991. It went on to be produced in London, in New York on Broadway, and came back to San Francisco for performances at the American Conservatory Theater (ACT). *Angels in America* was adapted as a television miniseries that aired on HBO in 2003. The play, set in 1985, poetically captured the early stages of the AIDS epidemic through the diverse viewpoints of its characters, written at the end of the decade during which it emerged. *Angels*, which has become one of the most iconic American plays of the 20th century, drew its inspiration from the combination of radical politics and creative experimentation happening in San Francisco in the 1970s and 80s.

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

1. Review the history of the gay rights movement and descriptions of the Cockettes and Angels of Light with students. Ask them to consider the following question as they watch the *STAGE LEFT* segment:
 - In what ways did the Cockettes and Angels of Light’s performance style and values reflect the counterculture and gay rights movements in San Francisco?



Cockettes Member. Photo: Scrumbly Koldewyn

2. As students watch the segment of *STAGE LEFT*, ask them to consider the following question:
 - Is it important for theater to tell the stories of people that are not always heard in our society? Why or why not? If so, why is theater an effective way to tell those stories?

POST-VIEWING REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Read the essay about The AIDS Show:
http://www.artistswithaids.org/artery/centerpieces/centerpieces_aidsshow.html
 - What impact did the AIDS epidemic have on San Francisco theater in the 1980s?
2. Watch the SPARK segment about the New Conservatory Theater Center (NCTC):
<http://www.kqed.org/arts/programs/spark/profile.jsp?essid=4702>
 - In the segment, Artistic Director Ed Decker says that NCTC's plays "speak to the experiences of the audiences, who like seeing themselves onstage." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
3. Watch the video of images from the 2010-2011 production of *Angels in America* at New York's Signature Theater: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2897QlrCAH8&feature=relmfu>, and the Interview with Tony Kushner: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_f3pLtKu1pg.
 - What are your reactions to what Kushner says about the role of theater?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Audiovisuals:

Excerpts of Stage Left
<http://stageleft-movie.com/educators/excerpts/>

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LGBT Theater - Stage Left

<https://vimeo.com/53705524>

Trailer for the 2002 documentary film, The Cockettes

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDHmgGHzDW0>

Angels of Light performance

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cabM1qmm8c>

Short video about ACT UP

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q__wGtL_rOM

The HBO miniseries of Angels in America is available for rent on Netflix. It is made up of two three-hour segments and provides an excellent opportunity for students to experience the play.

Webites:

Stage Left

<http://stageleft-movie.com>

Interactive timeline of Bay Area theater history

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

THEATER ACTIVITIES

In the early 1970s, gay men and lesbians were just beginning to feel more comfortable about being “out” and proud of who they were. Although they still faced homophobia, theater was a way of sharing and celebrating their identity.

Theater and Examining Social Justice

Prep Activity: Ask students to think of a person they are familiar with. This can be a person they know personally or a character in a book, movie, or play. Then ask them to write a character profile of that person composed of the following:

- Name, age, gender, and race/ethnicity of character;
- Physical appearance (face, hair, height/weight, other distinguishing features) and style of dress;
- Birthplace or where they grew up and family members;
- Single, married/partnered, or divorced/separated;
- Career/occupation;
- Favorite activity;
- Deepest desire (or motivation: what motivates them/what they want most);

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- Obstacle (what could prevent them from getting what they want);
- Deepest fear (what they are most afraid of in life).

If students do not know this information about the person they chose, have them use their imagination to make it up based on what they do know.

Both Sides of the Story: Break students into groups of 3 or 4. Ask each group to a social justice issue that they are familiar with. Encourage them to think about an issue that relates to prejudice or oppression a particular group of people faces (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc). Some examples could be police brutality, single mothers, gay marriage, etc.

Then ask each group to come up with one or two “yes or no” statements about this issue. Choose controversial statements that could solicit a range of viewpoints, such as:

The job of the police is to prevent crime by any means necessary. If a young woman ends up pregnant and raising a baby on her own, it's her fault. Marriage is only between a man and a woman.

Write each statement on the top of a piece of flip chart paper with a “yes” and “no” column underneath and post the papers around the room. Ask students to look at the statements and write down as many arguments for the “yes” or “no” column as they can think of on individual post-it notes. These arguments do not have to reflect their personal beliefs; they should represent a range of viewpoints on the issue. Then ask students to stick their post-its in the appropriate column. For example, if the statement was “marriage is only between a man and a woman,” a “yes” argument could be “that’s what it says in the Bible,” a “no” argument could be “everyone should be able to marry the person they love.”

From Argument to Character: Ask students to each choose a post-it note from one of the statements. Then, following the character profile model above, have them write a character profile for someone who would believe the argument they have chosen. For example, the person believing that the Bible mandates heterosexual marriage might be a religious leader or someone who attends a church where homosexuality is condemned as a sin.

Then, using the character profile, ask students to think about what this person might say if they had to share their belief with someone else. Have them write a short (half page) monologue, speaking in first person as their character sharing their belief. Ask students to read their monologues. After all students have read their monologues, ask them to reflect on this question: what did you learn about personal beliefs and prejudices from seeing these characters embody their arguments?

Extension--Characters in a Scene: These characters could then be used to write a short scene where conflicting beliefs cause dramatic conflict and the characters try to address that conflict.

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Theater and Celebration of Identity

Prep Activity: Ask students to think of either their favorite or least favorite daily activity. Then ask them to come up with a short movement that demonstrates that activity, one with a clear beginning and end. Have them practice it several times to make sure they know it well, and have students perform their movements in two or three groups. Then ask them to take a few minutes to make the movement “bigger” and more exaggerated (you can explain that their first movement was a two on the “size dial” and you want them to bring it up to ten). Share the definition of gesture with students and explain that they have each just created one.

Identity Story: Ask students to think of a moment in their lives where they felt proud of their identity. This moment must be as specific as possible. Divide students into pairs and ask them to each tell the story of this moment to their partner. Once they have finished telling their story, the partner who is listening will then share the words or phrases from the story that stuck with them.

Story to Gesture: When both members of the pair have told their story and shared words and phrases, each student will then choose a moment from the story to transform into a gesture. This could be a movement representing a literal aspect of the story (example: “my grandmother cooked us rice every day” could be a movement illustrating a detail of her cooking process) or a more metaphorical or emotional moment (example: “when I came out to my father, he hugged me and said he loved me” could be a movement expressing the relief or joy or gratitude felt).

Once students have developed their gestures, ask them to choose a word or short phrase from their story and add it to the gesture. Encourage students to find the best place in the gesture to insert the word(s), and rearrange words in a phrase if it’s more effective. Have students perform their gestures in two or three groups and use the reflection framework to examine what students see in other group’s gestures.

REFLECTION FRAMEWORK

Prior to facilitating these activities with students, it may help to familiarize them with the theater terms in the toolbox, as well as reviewing the following framework for having students reflect on and analyze other students’ performances.

After students watch their peers’ performances, ask them the three following questions:

1. What do you see or hear?

Have students be as objective and neutral as possible, focusing on what is clearly observable or audible.

2. What do you think or feel based on what you see and hear?
3. What questions do you have/what more do you want to know?

Many of the exercises also provide specific things for students to reflect upon after watching the performance.

THEATER TOOLBOX

Monologue: In a play, a prolonged talk or discourse in which a single character speaks alone.

Character Profile: A description of a character, including physical aspects, personal history, and other aspects (fears, desires) that help create a more complete picture of who they are. A profile is used to create complex and compelling characters.

Motivation: Reason behind a character's action; what motivates a character to do what he does; what a character really wants.

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.

CREDITS

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