



Biddy Mason (1818-1891)

Drama Activities

National Core Arts Standards

Objectives

TH:CR2-8

a. Articulate and apply critical analysis, background knowledge, research, and historical and cultural context to the development of original ideas for a drama/theatre work.

TH:PR5-8

b. Use a variety of technical elements to create a design for a rehearsal or drama/theatre work.

TH:RE7-8

a. Apply criteria to the evaluation of artistic choices in a drama/theatre work.

TH:RE8-8

a. Recognize and share artistic choices when participating in or observing a drama/theatre work.

TH:RE8-8

b. Analyze how cultural perspectives influence the evaluation of a drama/theatre work.

TH:CN11-8

b. Identify and use artifacts from a time period and place to develop performance and design choices in a drama/theatre work.

Enduring Understanding(s)

Theatre artists work to discover different ways of communicating meaning.

Theatre artists develop personal processes and skills for a performance or design.

Theatre artists reflect to understand the impact of drama processes and theatre experiences.

Theatre artists' interpretations of drama/theatre work are influenced by personal experiences and aesthetics.

Theatre artists critically inquire into the ways others have thought about and created drama processes and productions as a way to inform their own work.

Essential Questions

How do theatre artists transform and edit their initial ideas?

Why are strong choices essential to interpreting a drama or theatre piece?

How do theatre artists comprehend the essence of drama processes and theatre experiences?

How can the same work of art communicate different messages to different people?

In what ways can research into theatre histories, theories, literature and performances alter the way a drama process of production is understood?

What can I do to fully prepare a performance or technical design?

What happens when theatre artists use their imaginations and/or learned theatre skills while engaging in creative exploration and inquiry?

Theatre Literacy

- Listen and watch a presentation attentively demonstrating whole body listening.
- Improvise scenes using dialogue, body language, facial expressions, projection, pantomime, and sounds.
- Create tableaus, voices in the head, improvised scenes, and playwriting.
- Consistently maintain concentration.
- Develop empathy.
- Embody a variety of characters through individual interpretation.
- Work collaboratively and flexibility to create an imagined world
- Investigate and incorporate historical context

Time / Materials

1 class period for each drama lesson.



Playwriting

1. As Bidy, write a monologue explaining how you care for people with smallpox. Why are you risking your own health to assist the ailing?
2. While Bidy is walking behind her enslaver's wagon train to Utah, she is confronted with rain, mud, floods, and ice. Explain in a journal entry, as Bidy, how you sustain the different terrains and not lose heart on the journey.
3. Bidy was one of the first African Americans to buy land in California. As Bidy, write a monologue explaining why you saved your money to buy land instead of other valuable assets.
4. When Bidy's attorney was not present to represent her, Judge Hayes invited Bidy into his chambers to discuss how her slave owner, Mr. Smith, was planning to leave free California for Texas where he could sell Bidy. Write a scene between Bidy and Judge Hayes when they met privately in his chambers.
5. As the guest speaker for a present-day graduation ceremony, Bidy shares and explains her motto with the graduates: "If you hold your hand closed, nothing good will come in. The open hand is blessed, for it gives an abundance even as it receives."

Playwriting Extension

Present the monologue to the class.
Video record the monologue.

Independent Drama Activity

Overview

Biddy was an extraordinary woman. She was a philanthropist, real estate entrepreneur, midwife, prison visitor, and founder of an orphanage, elementary school, travel aid society, and a church.

Students will make five individual tableaux from Biddy's life.

A **tableau** is a still picture similar to a statue. The actor(s) freezes in a pose using his body language and facial expressions to create a picture. Click [here](#) for examples of tableaux.

Voices in the head are the thoughts of the character in a particular moment. Click [here](#) for examples of voices in the head / thought tracking.

Process

1. Provide a [brief historical background](#) of Biddy's life.
2. Read the **Overview** to the class.
3. Show the videos explaining tableau and voices or summarize these techniques.
4. The facilitator will ask a volunteer to model a tableau of a person standing at the bus station who is cold. Next, the facilitator will say to the student, "voices in the head." The student will share the inner thoughts of the character.
5. The facilitator will ask students to make the first tableau:
 - A. *Biddy walking for over 8 hours in the rain to California.*
6. The facilitator will say, "3, 2, 1. Freeze." All students will model their tableau simultaneously and hold their pose.
7. The facilitator will call on a student and ask for "voices in the head". The student will share their inner thought of the character in that moment of time.
8. The facilitator will call on a few additional students to share their "voices in the head."
9. The facilitator will ask students to relax and unfreeze from the tableau position.
10. Repeat steps 6 through 9 to make the following tableaux:
 - B. *Biddy administering an herbal remedy to a patient with smallpox.*
 - C. *Biddy visiting a prison inmate.*
 - D. *Biddy purchasing land.*
 - E. *Biddy packing the Smith family bags for the journey westward.*



Discussion

1. Explain your experience making tableaux of Bidy Mason.
2. After listening to a variety of peers sharing “voices in the head”, which Bidy “voices in the head” was the most profound? Explain.
3. If you could go back and recreate any of the tableaux and “voices in the head,” what would you change and why?



Small Group Drama Activity

Biddy and Her Children (2 - 3 actors)

Overview

After Biddy purchased land, she told her daughters that the property was always to remain as their homestead, regardless of their circumstances.

Over dinner, Biddy explains to her teenage daughters that they can never sell their home after she passes away. The children try to convince Biddy that under certain circumstances they may need to sell the home. Biddy refuses to accept their reasons, and instead, reiterates the importance of home ownership and savings.

Process

1. Organize students into pairs or triads and assign them a designated area in the room to work.
2. Give the groups 10 minutes to choose their parts (Biddy and her children) and rehearse their scenes.
3. The scenes should be approximately 3 minutes in length and all of the members of the group must take a speaking role.
4. Because the scenes are not scripted and there are no props, students use **creative dialogue** (the words spoken by two or more actors) and **pantomime** objects (communicate an idea through movement and gestures). For example, the scene takes place in the dining room. The actors can pantomime using a fork, knife, cup, napkin, serving pieces, etc. while eating.
5. Each group will present their scene from their designated area for the class.
6. The facilitator will say, "3, 2, 1, action" and the scene begins.
7. When the scene is over, the facilitator will say, "Scene."
8. The students and facilitator will applaud the scene.

Discussion

1. Were the children's' reasons for wanting to sell the home valid?
2. Why was owning property so important to Biddy?

Biddy and Two Free Friends (3 actors)

Overview

For three years, Biddy was enslaved in free California. While picking up groceries for the Smith family at a local market, two free men told Biddy that she should be free.

Process

1. Organize students into triads and assign them a designated area in the room to work.
2. Give the groups 10 minutes to choose their parts (Biddy and the two friends) and rehearse their scenes.
3. The scenes should be approximately 3 minutes in length and all of the members of the group must take a speaking role.
4. Because the scenes are not scripted and there are no props, students use **creative dialogue** (the words spoken by two or more actors) and **pantomime** objects (communicate an idea through movement and gestures). For example, the scene takes place in a market. The actors can pantomime using a shopping cart/basket, produce, bread, cash register, etc.
5. Each group will present their scene from their designated area for the class.
6. The facilitator will say, “3, 2, 1, action” and the scene begins.
7. When the scene is over, the facilitator will say, “Scene.”
8. The students and facilitator will applaud the scene.

Discussion

1. Did Biddy know that she was free in California while living there during the first three years?
2. What happened to Biddy after she left the local market? Did she speak to Mr. Smith or her children about the situation?

Biddy, Mr. Robert Smith, and the Sheriff (3 actors)

Overview

After living in free California for three years, Mr. Smith was planning on moving to Texas so he could sell his slaves. While in the process of preparing to leave for Texas, the Sheriff intervened and issued a court order. The sheriff took Biddy and her daughters into protective custody.

Biddy and Mr. Smith are loading the wagon and the sheriff asks where they are going. Mr. Smith states that they are traveling to Texas and Biddy and her daughters are traveling on their own free will. After acknowledging Mr. Smith's plan, the sheriff issues a court order and takes Biddy into protective custody.

Process

1. Organize students into triads. Assign them a designated area in the room to work.
2. Give the groups 10 minutes to choose their parts (Biddy, Mr. Smith, and the sheriff. A fourth student can play Biddy's daughter.) and rehearse their scenes.
3. The scenes should be approximately 3 minutes in length and all of the members of the group must take a speaking role.
4. Because the scenes are not scripted and there are no props, students use **creative dialogue** (the words spoken by two or more actors) and **pantomime** objects (communicate an idea through movement and gestures). For example, the scene takes place next to a wagon on the street. The actors can pantomime loading the wagon with food, clothes, bedding, towels, games, etc.
5. Each group will present their scene from their designated area for the class.
6. The facilitator will say, "3, 2, 1, action" and the scene begins.
7. When the scene is over, the facilitator will say, "Scene."
8. The students and facilitator will applaud the scene.

Discussion

1. Do you think Biddy understood why the sheriff had taken her and her daughters into protective custody at first? Explain.
2. Did Mr. Smith understand that Biddy could sue him for her freedom?
3. What reasons did Mr. Smith use in explaining to Biddy why they were traveling to Texas?

Town Hall Meeting (whole group)

Overview

At a modern-day town hall meeting, the mayor has asked the village to convene to discuss a posthumous statue in honor of Biddy Mason. The discussion focuses on whether the statue should reflect her work as an entrepreneur, pioneer, health careprovider, investor, philanthropist, or hero. By the end of the meeting, a decision will be made.

Process

1. Choose one student to play the mayor and the other students will be members of the community – i.e., librarian, parent, teacher, construction worker, banker, etc.
2. The mayor begins the scene by thanking the community members for attending, and summarizes the purpose of the meeting.
3. Each attendant will have an opportunity to share and debate their ideas.
4. After a vote is cast by the community for the type of statue that will be erected, the mayor thanks the community for attending and informs them that the next meeting will be devoted to finding an artist.
5. Because the scenes are not scripted and there are no props, students use **creative dialogue** (the words spoken by two or more actors) for the scene.
6. There is no rehearsal.
7. The facilitator will say, “3, 2, 1, action” and the scene begins.
8. When the scene is over, the facilitator will say, “Scene.”
9. The students and facilitator will applaud the scene.

Discussion

1. What was Biddy’s most important contribution?
2. If Biddy was in the room right now, what would you want to ask her?

Special Needs Drama Activity

Ripple Effect (small groups)

Overview

While walking 1700 miles from Mississippi to Utah behind Mr. Smith's wagon, Bidy endured the rain, mud, floods, and ice. She was responsible for setting up and breaking down camp, caring for her children, and cooking meals on the journey westward.

Students will dramatize one of the following moments: walking through inclement weather, breaking down / setting up camp, caring for children, or cooking a meal using tableau.

A **tableau** is a still picture similar to a statue. The actor(s) freezes in a pose using his body language and facial expressions to create a picture. Click [here](#) for examples of tableaus.

Following the tableau, students, one at a time, will add one sound and movement to create a **ripple** that will bring the statue to life. The group will decide the sequence of the sounds and movements. Once the ripple (sound and movement) has gone through all of the actors once, a second ripple can be played. Following the second ripple, a third ripple can follow, or the ripples can evolve into an improvised scene.

Process

1. Place students into groups of 3-4 and assign them a designated area to work.
2. Students choose a moment: walking through inclement weather, breaking down / setting up camp, caring for children, or cooking a meal.
3. Students select characters in the tableau. For example, characters in setting up the tent include Bidy and her three daughters.
4. Students individually rehearse their sound and movement they will incorporate into the scene.
5. Students determine the order of the sounds/movements.
6. Each group will present their tableau and ripple from their designated area for the class.
7. The facilitator will say, "3, 2, 1, action" and the scene begins.
8. When the scene is over, the facilitator will say, "Scene."
9. The students and facilitator will applaud the scene.

10. Students can individually create a second ripple (sound and movement).
11. Repeat steps 5 - 9.
12. Students can individually create a third ripple, or the scene can evolve into an improvised scene using **creative dialogue** (the words spoken by two or more actors) and **pantomime** objects (communicate an idea through movement and gestures).

Questions

1. How did your ripple (sound and movement) add to the overall effect of the scene?
2. Are you empathetic about Bidy's situation?
3. What is the mood of the tableau?

Student Accommodations

Groups encompass heterogeneous/flexible groupings.

Shy and English Language Learners write their discussion response.

Autistic and shy students take pantomimed parts and/or smaller speaking roles.

Gifted students model the scenes for visual learners.

Discussion topics are given orally and written on the board.

Seating accommodations are made for visually and hearing-impaired students.

A student can shadow (follow the actor around and simultaneously do the things that they do) a shy student.

Students draw a picture in lieu of making a verbal comment.

Students self-cast and differentiate themselves by the size of their selected role.

Special needs students can play scenes in the last group so they can watch others first.

Gifted students can play multiple parts and/or participate in multiple scenes

The sequence of the scene is written on the board / projected on a white board.

Facilitator side coaches those who need extra assistance.