

## BESSIE COLEMAN (1892-1926)

### Drama Activities

#### *National Core Arts Standards*

#### Objectives

TH:CR2 Grade 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 Grade 8

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

TH:RE7 Grade 8

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

TH:RE8 Grade 8

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

TH:RE8 Grade 8

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

TH:CN11 Grade 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 Bessie Coleman, write your own eulogy. How do you want people to remember you best? How did you overcome the obstacles in your life? What was your greatest accomplishment? What do you want your legacy to be?
2. Write a total of 30 text messages between Bessie and her brother after her first plane accident. In the text messages, Bessie should explain how the accident occurred, her physical condition, her emotional state, where she is located, and when she will be leaving the hospital.
3. Write a monologue from the perspective of an observer watching the aviation show for the first time. What exactly do you see? What do you think about the upside-down loops, figure “8”s, and dips towards the ground stunts? What do you know about the pilot, Bessie Coleman? Why are you here today watching the show? Do you plan on attending another aviation show? What will you tell your friends who were unable to watch the events unfold today in the sky?
4. Write a scene between Bessie and her mom when she tells her she wants to be an aviatrix. What reasons does Bessie give for wanting to fly? What argument does Bessie’s mom give for not wanting her daughter to be a pilot?

### Playwriting Extension

Present the monologue to the class.

Video record the monologue.

## Independent Drama Activity

### Overview

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.

**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 Bessie Coleman.
2. Show the videos explaining tableau and voices or summarize these techniques.
3. The facilitator will ask a volunteer to model a tableau of a person who won the lottery. Next, the facilitator will say to the student, “voices in the head.” The student will share the inner thoughts of the character.
4. Assign students to a designated area in the room to work individually.
5. The facilitator will read the first tableau:
  - A. *Bessie reading her acceptance letter from the Cauldron Brothers’ School of Aviation in Le Crotoy.*
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 individually to share their “voices in the head.”
9. The facilitator will ask students to relax and unfreeze from the tableau position.
10. Repeat steps 6-9 for tableaus B-D:
  - B. *Bessie at the hospital in severe pain after her first accident.*
  - C. *Bessie is lecturing to people in Florida about the importance of flight.*
  - D. *Bessie demands that entry to her Texas aviation shows not be segregated.*

### Discussion

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

## *Improvised Scenes*

### **Bessie and the Flight Instructor (2 actors)**

#### Overview

This is Bessie Coleman's first day at the caldron Brothers' School of Aviation in Le Crotoy, France where she will learn how to be a pilot. The flight instructor and Bessie are sitting in the cockpit together. The flight instructor only speaks French and Bessie's French is very limited. In this scene, the flight instructor is trying to show Bessie how to operate the aircraft from within the cockpit.

During the scene, the actor playing the flight instructor will only speak in gibberish. The flight instructor will use pantomime to explain the different parts of the operations.

#### Process

1. Organize students into pairs. Assign them a designated area in the room to work.
2. Give the groups 10 minutes to choose their parts (Bessie and flight instructor) 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, Bessie is in the cockpit with the flight instructor. The actors can pantomime putting on a helmet and seat belt, pressing buttons on the flight deck, and taking notes.
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. How might Bessie's experience in aviation school differ today?
2. What drives Bessie to maintain composure while trying to learn aviation in a foreign language?

## Bessie and Her Brother (2 actors)

### Overview

One of Bessie's brothers has just returned from serving in World War I where he was stationed in France. Bessie is with her brother in his Chicago living room after a long day of working as a manicurist. Her brother is sharing three stories about his experience in the war. Enamored by her brother's different jobs in the war, Bessie also learns that French women flew planes. This sparks her interest in becoming an aviatrix.

### Process

1. Organize students into pairs. Assign them a designated area in the room to work.
2. Give the groups 10 minutes to choose their parts (Bessie and flight instructor) 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, while in the living room, the actors can pantomime reading a book, moving a couch pillow, eating an apple, 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. Why does Bessie's brother tell her stories about his experience in the war?
2. Are Bessie's brother's stories similar or different to today's military members serving overseas? Explain.

## Segregated Stadium (small group)

### Overview

Performance venues, including air shows, were segregated into black and white sections in the 1920's. At the stadium entrance, patrons are greeted by an attendant who takes their tickets and guides them to their designated segregated seating areas. Before the aviation show starts, Bessie informs the manager that she refuses to do her show if the attendants are segregated. The manager explains to Bessie that because Texas is segregated, he had to establish two separate entrances for black and white people.

Bessie asserts that unless there is only one gate for everyone to use, she will not perform anymore. The manager agrees to Bessie's request and reminds her the stadium, not the entrances, will remain segregated.

### Process

1. Organize students into groups of 4-5. Assign them an area in the room to work.
2. Give the groups 10 minutes to choose their parts (Bessie, manager and attendants) 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 outside. Actors can pantomime the ticket to enter the stadium, putting on a hat, carrying a purse, 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. Why did Bessie argue with the manager about the segregated entrance when the seating areas were segregated and could not be changed?
2. What did attendants think about being segregated?
3. Are there any public or private places today that are segregated?

## Newscast (small group)

### Overview

While preparing for an aerial show in Jacksonville, Florida on April 30, 1926, Bessie was a passenger while William Willis, a mechanic, piloted the plane. A loose wrench jammed the gears, causing the steering to fail. The plane went into a tailspin and crashed.

Bystanders and first responders witnessed the crash. News reporters arrived at the site shortly after the crash to investigate the accident and report the unfolding events live.

### Process

1. Organize students into groups of 4-5. Assign them a designated area in the room to work.
2. Give the groups 10 minutes to choose their parts (reporter, bystander, first responder, mechanic, etc.) 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 at the crash site. Actors can pantomime the microphone, pen and paper, protective gear, 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. Although Bessie’s plane engine was reported to have been poorly maintained, could the accident have been prevented?
2. What are some differences between the way the accident was reported when it occurred and how it would be reported today?
3. Why did Bessie and the mechanic, William Willis, take the plane out for a test flight if they knew the engine was poorly maintained?

## Talk Show (half or whole class)

### Overview

In the present day, Bessie Coleman is on talk show television being interviewed for the first time after she retained her aeronautical license and returned to the United States to perform her daredevil stunt shows. The talk show host asks her questions about her background, interests, challenges, and advice she would give to young people interested in aeronautics before taking questions from the audience.

### Process

1. Select one student to be the talk show host and another student to be Bessie. The host and Bessie should sit in front of the class.
2. There is no rehearsal for this scene.
3. 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 studio. Actors can pantomime a microphone, camera, bottle of water, etc.
4. The facilitator will say, “3, 2, 1, action” and the scene begins.
5. The host introduces himself, introduces the name of the show, thanks the audience for coming, welcomes Bessie, and provides some background information about Bessie before asking questions.
6. When the scene is over, the facilitator will say, “Scene.”
7. The students and facilitator will applaud the scene.
8. Repeat the scene with different students playing the host and Bessie.

### Discussion

1. If Bessie did not have a fatal accident, what would she be doing today?
2. After watching and participating in the scene, what more do you want to learn about Bessie?

## *Special Needs Drama Activity*

### **Soundscape** (small or medium groups)

#### Overview

Think about all of the different sounds an airplane makes while the airplane is starting, speeding down the runway, flying, landing, and turning off.

You will make an airplane soundscape, sequence of sounds that weave together, to tell the story of an airplane from turning on to shutting off.

#### Process

1. Students can work independently or in pairs/triads.
2. Students brainstorm the following airplane sounds: starting engine, speeding down runway, landing, and shutting off.
3. Write the sound names down on a piece of paper in chronological order.
4. Have students simultaneously make the first sound and continue the sound for 10-15 seconds.
5. Repeat Step 4 for the remaining sounds.
6. Have students rehearse their soundscape by simultaneously making each sound and then moving on to the next sound without pausing.
7. Students should experiment with the volume for each sound.  
*Optional* – Soundscapes can be created with each person creating their own sound and solely contributing their sound when it is their turn.  
*Optional* – Soundscapes can have some sounds overlap.
8. The facilitator will say, “3, 2, 1, action” and the scene begins.
9. Present the soundscape for the class.
10. When the soundscape is finished, the facilitator will say, “Scene.”
11. The students and facilitator will applaud the scene.

#### Discussion

1. What specific sound(s) did you hear that made the soundscape believable?
2. Are there any additional sounds you would include in the soundscape?
3. If the airplane could talk (personification), what would it say about Bessie?

### 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.