

## Active Theatre History

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### ABSTRACT

*The study of Theatre History, overwhelmingly considered beneficial to high school theatre students, has a greater success of engaging them if it involves active and creative learning. That's the theory; this article describes one praxis that supports the theory. It is a learning activity that incorporates higher order thinking skills to synthesize knowledge into the creation of something new. This project requires students to research genres or eras of theatre history and function as playwrights who write a scene that reflects the characters, conflicts, and conventions of a given period. Enhancing the goal of moving from theory into practice, this article provides a detailed description of the praxis and includes accompanying resources.*

Every student I have ever had in a Theatre Methods course believes that a high school theatre course must include Theatre History. The

challenge for these future teachers always is—How do you make a Theatre History unit as active and engaging as your other units? This is not a new theatre teaching issue. In 1993, teacher and author Nancy Bishop faced the same situation. “The challenge facing you, the teacher,” she wrote in her “Teaching Theatre History” article, “is to get students interested and engaged in theatre history. High school students are not interested in listening to lectures or in memorizing timelines, dates, and facts. Most teenagers want to act and be active. That’s what sets drama classes apart from the rest of the academic day” (p. 3).

Stefani Ethridge Woodson, in her 2004 article “Creating an Educational Theatre Program for the Twenty-First Century,” echoes Bishop’s belief in active learning, calling for instruction and a “... program that treats young people as active agents rather than passive observers... [who are] capable of producing art by allowing them to practice the artistic identities of playwright, producer, performer, director, and designer” (p. 27). Seven years later, Shawnda Moss added her voice to those endorsing the value of the study of the past and its plays and practices. “There is much to be gained from exploring theatre history in your classroom, but only if it is done in a way that prompts students to consider the contexts that drive artistic expressions” (p. 11). “...[A]side from teaching the facts and terms of theatre history,” Moss continues, “teachers should also use higher order thinking in instruction, assignments, and assessments” (p. 12).

My graduate students would agree wholeheartedly with the theory promoted by these authors, but our discussions would always circle back to “How?” How can we design theatre history lessons that are “active, multi-dimensional, and rigorous” (Moss, p. 12)? Because the word “praxis” means the practical application of a theory—practice, as distinguished from theory—this journal seems like a good place to share one innovative way to make Theatre History a dynamic experience in which students are active creators. More than just a brief paragraph describing this assignment, what follows is a detailed description of an active learning project accompanied by resources to aid and accelerate implementation and assessment.

This assignment was one that I gave to my high school students regularly. Like many teachers who create successful learning experiences, I kept thinking, “I should write an article about this. I should share this idea with other teachers.” Then the years went by,

leaving me with a collection of good scenes, good memories, and good intentions. I shared my plans and notes with my graduate students who helped me clarify the instructions and strengthen the rubric. All of that written material, however, does not spontaneously translate into a useful article. Finding myself with extra hours this past year, I finally focused on my goal of organizing my experiences into a coherent description of the project that I hope will be useful to other educators.

### ***Active and Authentic***

This assignment requires students to research and apply their findings in a project that meets particular criteria, but also requires imagination and ingenuity. It reflects the principles of authentic assessment—creating a product that is or is close to what professionals in the field create. “Authentic assessment is designed to promote the use of higher order cognitive skills related to using, modifying, or rebuilding knowledge into something new” (Villarroel et al, p. 848). In this case, students will work as playwrights commissioned to write a short original script.

## **THE ASSIGNMENT BASICS**

All students receive the same scenario:

- Character 1 searches for a misplaced object.
- Character 2 arrives and helps Character 1 search.
- In their search, they discover a letter or document or item that somehow incriminates Character 3.
- Character 3 enters, discovers them examining the letter, document, or item, and confronts them.

The task is to work as playwrights, devise a scene that follows this scenario, and then write it so that it reflects the style of a particular Theatre History era or genre, for example—a Greek Tragedy or Restoration Comedy or American Musical Theatre.

### ***Research Before Writing***

Students will research their given period of Theatre History or genre to learn its characteristics. This research is easy to do via the Internet,

beginning with a search for “Characteristics of \_\_\_\_\_ Theatre.” “Crash Course Theatre,” the PBS series on YouTube, can also provide a sufficient number of facts to inform the main assignment goal of writing an original scene.

Students should also read examples of plays from their given era. Accessing copies of brief scenes from plays should provide enough information for the assignment. An astonishing number of plays and scenes are located easily via an Internet search. The character names should be creatively indicative of the given time period. (Some of my students’ examples: a Greek tragic character named Caltigone or a Restoration Comic characters named Sir Walter Widget and Lady Snobwell) The stage directions and dialogue should likewise take their inspiration from the language used in the scripts by the playwrights of the era. A Shakespearean scene will use “thee,” “thou,” “thy,” and “thine.” A Chekhov scene will include detailed stage directions to set the scene, the time of day, the weather, and the characters’ clothing. A Greek tragedy will require a Chorus in addition to the three characters and an American musical will require, of course, at least one song to move the plot along.

The letter, document, or item could be a tablet, scroll, birth certificate, message in a bottle, or some type of treasure. My students have used photographs, paintings, diaries, and love letters. The choice is up to the student playwright(s) and should be driven by the time period of the piece.

Students will also use the information they find in their research to write an introduction to their scene. This introduction will provide a little background information, introduce their scene’s setting and characters, and be written in a style that would suit a narrator. Some of my students recognized that this aspect of the work mirrored what they would include in a paper, but the performative intention of this writing was much more motivating to them.

### ***In Person or Online***

This assignment works for in person or online instruction. In person, students can collaborate on the research and the script, rehearse, and then present it. Online, students can work alone or collaborate on the research and the script. Melissa Bean, one of my graduate students and a full-time high school theatre teacher, found this to be true:

Collaborative script writing ended up being a fantastic strategy to use in the remote classroom setting. Rather than simply lecture to students, I was able to use collaborative script writing in small groups to allow students to explore the content themselves and discern what should be included in a script presentation to the class. Engaging students is a challenge in remote learning and collaborative script writing enabled them to take a more active role in the content and promoted increased classroom engagement as they had the opportunity to work collaboratively with their peers. (personal communication with author, 2020)

Instead of presenting the script as a scene, students can record it as a radio play with three actors reading the roles or with one actor reading all three roles in different voices. Most cell phones have recording apps and the resulting files can be uploaded to Google Drive and accessed with ease. A script written by an individual could also be shared onscreen in an online session and read aloud with volunteers voicing the characters.

## **ASSIGNMENT MATERIALS**

What follows are a set of documents to use or adapt for students. There is a *Theatre History or Genre Research* sheet to guide the collection of information, the *Theatre History Scenario Assignment* and instructions, an *Assessment Checklist*, and a *Script Writing Format* page containing instructions and examples.

### ***Sample Scripts***

Below are two portions of scripts that high school students in my advanced acting course wrote for this assignment. My students, like those of Jason Whitney (2006), enjoyed "...using the skills used by professional dramatists: developing fictional characters, setting the scene, generating dialogue, creating conflict, and developing a theme" (p. 55). Teachers may choose to share the script portions with students or simply examine them to strengthen the understanding of the potential of this assignment.

**Restoration Comedy Scene Section**

DIZABEL

Alack-a-day! How could I have lost Dandim's ring? Betrothed only yesterday and already I have proven myself a careless and ungrateful maid. Surely if Dandim were to discover my misdeed, he would cancel our engagement! (*She searches the room.*)

DANDIM

(*Offstage*) Dizabel, my love, are you within?

DIZABEL

(*Underneath the desk*) O me! Dandim cannot see my naked left hand!

DANDIM

(*Bursting in*) Ah ha!

DIZABEL

Ah!

DANDIM

I saw you hiding, you little minx. Are you playing games with me?

DIZABEL

No! Ha-ha! Here I am!

DANDIM

Darling, come. My love. My heart. My soul. My ring!? Dizabel, my pet, where is my ring? Have you changed your mind? Farewell!

DIZABEL

Dandim! Wait!

DANDIM

No! Good-bye forever.

DIZABEL

No! Pray... (*Desperately*) But you're spoiling the game!

DANDIM

*(Instantly)* What's that? Game you say?

DIZABEL

Why yes! I've hidden the ring. It's somewhere in this room. And when you find it... you shall get a prize!

DANDIM

A prize! Well, I say, Dizabel! You are a clever damsel! Let the game begin! *(He begins to search)* Ha! What's this?

DIZABEL

You've found it then?

DANDIM

Found it, yes! Proof that Boyd Backstab, my dearest friend in all the world, is nothing but a... *(Searching for the word)* Oh, you know. What's the word? A person who hurts you when you're not looking.

DIZABEL

Backstabber?

DANDIM

That's it! *(Reads the letter aloud)* "Dearest Dizabel Manypenny, thou art the goodliest lady that ever mine eyes beheld. Though my heart continues to beat, I only live for the day when you shall be mine." The rogue!

DIZABEL

Pish, I'd quite forgotten about that! Dandim, you musn't pay it any mind. I thought it best to forget the letter entirely...  
*(Enter Boyd)*

BOYD

Unfortunately, forgetting it would be the worst thing you could do.

\* \* \*

***“Post War American” Theatre Scene Section***

MARY ANN

Where does Mother keep that passport? What time is it?

DOUGLAS

Just after 4. When was her appointment?

MARY ANN

3:00. She'll be back any minute and I really don't know when we're going to get another chance to look. (*She opens and slams desk drawers.*).

DOUGLAS

Relax, Mare. We are going to find it. Stop slamming drawers. Here. Look through this pile of papers.

*(Both flip through some pages for a few seconds.)*

Huh. This looks like your birth certificate...except that it says “Margaret” not “Mary.” Yes. “Margaret Ann Foster. Born on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of June, 1935.” You never—

MARY ANN

What? Let me see that. (*She pulls the document away from him.*)

DOUGLAS

You never told me that you changed your name, or had a—

MARY ANN

This isn't mine. Who the hell is Margaret Ann?!

DOUGLAS

*(Hesitating)* Twin? Your twin? See, look, here's yours.

MARY ANN

*(She reads and compares the birth certificates)* “Mary Ann Foster born on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of June, 1935...born to Meredith C. Foster...at 12:04 A.M.” *(Compares it to the other)* “born to Meredith C. Foster at...12:26

A.M.” (*She tries to process what she sees.*) I had a sister... a *twin*?!

MRS. FOSTER

(*Offstage*) Mary Ann? Doug? What’s all that racket?!

\* \* \*

***National Core Theatre Standards addressed by this assignment:***

Theatre/Creating

TH:Cr2.1 Process Component: *Develop*

Anchor Standard: *Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.*

Enduring Understanding: *Theatre artists work to discover different ways of communicating meaning.*

Essential Question: *How, when, and why do theatre artists' choices change?*

Grade: High School

Performance Level: Proficient

TH:Cr2.1.HSI

- a. Explore the function of history and culture in the development of a dramatic concept through a critical analysis of original ideas in a drama/theatre work.

Grade: High School

Performance Level: Accomplished

TH:Cr2.1.HSII

- a. Refine a dramatic concept to demonstrate a critical understanding of historical and cultural influences of original ideas applied to a drama/theatre work.
- b. Cooperate as a creative team to make interpretive choices for a drama/theatre work.

Grade: High School

Performance Level: Advanced

TH:Cr2.1.HSIII

- a. Develop and synthesize original ideas in a drama/theatre work utilizing critical analysis, historical and cultural context, research, and western or non-western theatre traditions.
- b. Collaborate as a creative team to discover artistic solutions and make interpretive choices in a devised or scripted drama/theatre work.

### ***Theatre History or Genre Research***

Researcher(s) Names: \_\_\_\_\_

Theatre History Era or Genre: \_\_\_\_\_

Approximate years of this era or genre: \_\_\_\_\_

A brief list of some plays and playwrights of the era or genre:

**Plays**

**Playwrights**

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

A brief list of some of the character names found in plays of the era or genre:

|       |
|-------|
| _____ |
| _____ |
| _____ |
| _____ |
| _____ |

A brief list of some of the theatre conventions (customs or practices) of the era or genre:

|       |
|-------|
| _____ |
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A brief list of some lines of dialogue from a play or two of the era or genre:

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## ***Theatre History Scene Assignment***

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### **Eras or Genres of Theatre History**

|                                           |                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Greek Tragedy or Comedy                   | Indian Sanskrit Drama                                           |
| Roman Theatre                             | Beijing Opera                                                   |
| Medieval—Mystery, Morality, Miracle plays | Realism (Ibsen, Chekhov)                                        |
| Italian Renaissance                       | Naturalism, Expressionism (Strindberg)                          |
| Commedia Dell Arte                        | Surrealism, Epic Theatre (Brecht)                               |
| French Neoclassical Comedy                | 20th Century Symbolism and Expressionism                        |
| Restoration Comedy                        | Postwar American (Williams, O'Neill, Miller, Wilson, Hansberry) |
| 18th Century Sentimentalism               | Burlesque-Vaudeville                                            |
| Ballad Opera                              | American Musical Theatre                                        |
| Elizabethan/Shakespearean                 | Theatre of the Absurd                                           |
| Jacobean                                  |                                                                 |
| Melodrama                                 |                                                                 |
| Asian Theatre (Noh, Kabuki, Bunraku)      |                                                                 |

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### **Tasks**

1. Write a scene in the style of one of the eras or genres listed above using the following scenario and correct script writing format:
  - Character 1 searches for a misplaced object.
  - Character 2 arrives and helps Character 1 search.
  - In their search, they discover a letter, document, or item that somehow incriminates Character 3.
  - Character 3 enters, discovers them examining the letter, document, or item and confronts them.
2. Write a 5—10 sentence introduction to your script that identifies:
  - its era or genre
  - some of the theatre conventions employed in the plays of this era or genre
  - some of the plays and playwrights of this era or genre
  - the setting for your scene
  - your characters and a short description of each

(Note: This introduction should be written so that a Narrator could read it before the start of a performance of your scene.)

*The criteria for this assignment appears on the next page.*

## ***Theatre History or Genre Scene Scoring Sheet***

Theatre History Time Period or Genre of Scene: \_\_\_\_\_

Playwright(s): \_\_\_\_\_

|                                                                                                                             | <b>Definitely<br/>9</b> | <b>Mostly<br/>7</b> | <b>Partially<br/>5</b> | <b>Minimally<br/>3</b> | <b>None<br/>0</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| The scene follows the given scenario.                                                                                       |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |
| The scene reflects theatre conventions of plays of the given time period or genre.                                          |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |
| The language of the scene is typical of the given time period or genre.                                                     |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |
| The character names reflect those used in the plays of the given time period or genre.                                      |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |
| The scene is written/typed in correct script writing format.                                                                |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |
| The script length is between 2 and 5 typewritten pages.                                                                     |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |
| The script shows evidence of careful proofreading for correct/appropriate spelling, punctuation, use of italics, and typos. |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |
| The introduction identifies the scene's era or genre some of its theatre conventions.                                       |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |
| The introduction identifies some of the plays and playwrights of the scene's era or genre.                                  |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |
| The introduction identifies the scene's setting and characters with a short description of each.                            |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |
| The script was submitted on time.                                                                                           |                         |                     |                        |                        |                   |

88-99 Standing Ovation  
 77-87 Round of Applause  
 66-76 Polite Clapping  
 0-65 Back to Rehearsal

**Total Points** \_\_\_\_\_

## ***Script Writing Format***

### **TITLE**

(Centered and in ALL CAPS)

**By Playwright(s)**

**Character List** (Character names in ALL CAPS followed by a brief description)

QUEEN AUDRASTOS, Ruler of the kingdom during her husband's illness

TIMOSTHENES, her son and heir to the throne

JAESOP, their long-time servant

**Setting** (A brief description is fine, but you may include important details)

An office in a suburban home

*or*

A disheveled office full of books, piles of papers, and ratty furniture in a mid-20th century suburban home

**Dialogue** (Center the CHARACTER NAME—ALL CAPS—and begin the dialogue left-justified on the following line.)

MAGNOLIA

Petunia, please, please stay! Help me find my ring! I need your keen eyes.  
Please!

PETUNIA

I'll stay, if you promise not to utter another word about dear Vinca neglecting you.

**Stage Directions** (*Italicize* the text and put it in parentheses.)

*(The lights come up. James enters from the bathroom after his morning shower. He is dressed in a buttoned-down shirt, boxers, and dress socks. He sings and dances as he pulls on his trousers and finishes grooming himself.)*

JAMES

*(Sings)*

Love is in the air! Love is here—right here!

I'll slap on some cologne. Where is my cell phone?

I'll put an end to days and nights of being all alone!

## CONCLUSION

The contents of this article are just one response to the question of how to make the study of Theatre History active, engaging, and authentic for young people. Let them be researchers for a reason. Let them be playwrights within parameters. Let them apply what they learn in a creative context, producing new work to share in ways that theatre artists have always shared—in scripts and on stage. And, of course, let them use the theatre history scripts produced to perform the original scenes and further expand active learning goals.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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Web sites:

[ArtsEducationOnline.org](http://ArtsEducationOnline.org)

[DramaticApproachesToTeaching.com](http://DramaticApproachesToTeaching.com)