

Teacher Tool 252: The Cassius Project— Theater Arts Activity Ideas

This teacher tool provides activity ideas in the area of Theater Arts that are related to videos in the “Cassius Project” series of videos available on the Educate.Today website. The “Cassius Project” is an initiative created by Metro Theater Company surrounding its 2016 production of “And In This Corner...Cassius Clay.” Educate.Today is proud and honored to be a collaborative partner in this endeavor through the production of a series of videos and related educational materials. Originally developed to “offer a series of community programs, wrap-around tools and resources related to the production to educate audiences and then engage and empower them to find ways to get personally involved in making St. Louis a stronger community,” these videos and materials are designed to take the project to an even wider audience of students, educators, theater lovers, and community change agents across the country.

Through the story of young Cassius Clay growing up in Louisville, Kentucky, playwright Idris Goodwin explores powerful and compelling issues and themes and invites us to participate in important conversations about bullying, identity, racism, community, and the capacity for empowerment and difference making in all of us. Videos and educational materials in the project are designed for students and teachers in grades 5 through 12 to be used for cross-curricular exploration and building wide conversation as well as within the specific curriculum areas of Language Arts, Theater/Drama, Social Studies/History, and Character Education.

Video resources in this series are:

Theater 41: Meet the Playwright—A Conversation with Idris Goodwin
<https://educate.today/videos/4514>

Theater 42: Meet the Players—A Conversation with the Director and Actors of Metro Theater Company’s Production of “And In This Corner...Cassius Clay”
<https://educate.today/videos/4516>

Theater 43: Scene 1—Cassius Meets Officer Joe Martin
<https://educate.today/videos/4519>

Theater 44: Scene 2—Learning the News of Emmett Till’s Death
<https://educate.today/videos/4522>

Theater 45: Scene 3—Eddie and Cassius Go to a Whites Only Diner
<https://educate.today/videos/4524>

Theater 46: On Boxing and Fight Choreography
<https://educate.today/videos/4526>

**Activity Ideas related to Theater Arts
begin on the next page of this document**

Activity Idea 1: What did you learn from the playwright?

This activity can be done by individual students, students in small groups, or an entire class.

Activity Process: After viewing the interview with playwright Idris Goodwin (Theater 41: Meet the Playwright), have students' journal, write an essay, and/or discuss as a class or in small groups their responses to the interview. Potential discussion starter questions include:

1. What new insights did you gain into the playwriting process? What new insights did you gain into the structure of a play?
2. Mr. Goodwin talks about how he perceives his role in society as a playwright, the kind of stories he likes to tell, etc. How do you see the role of a writer in society? What stories do you most want to tell? How would you want to tell them?
3. Mr. Goodwin talks about being interested in the “shades of gray” within social issues and writing about people and events living in those shades of gray. What do you think about that idea? Are there “shades of gray” you are interested in exploring in theater? Are there examples of plays you've read and/or performed in that illustrate this “shade of gray” concept? What was your response to them? What did you like about them? What did you not?
4. Mr. Goodwin talks about the inclusion of a “training montage” in the play and that this play, as it developed, became more cinematic than may be true of much theater. What is your reaction to that idea? When you viewed the three scenes from the play (Theater 43: Scene 1; Theater 44: Scene 2, and Theater 45: Scene 3) did you notice any of these “cinematic” concepts in the way they were staged?
5. Mr. Goodwin talks about how characters come to life in his plays with the development of the character of Corky as just one example. In what ways did Mr. Goodwin's discussion of these ideas influence how you might approach the performance of a specific character in any play, or, if you were directing a play, how you might approach helping actors develop their performance of the character?

Activity Variations:

1. Develop discussion starter questions of your own based on viewing the interview with Mr. Goodwin.
2. Based on any of the starter questions above or ones of your own, have students create a short video answering the question (60 seconds maximum) that would be appropriate for publication on our Educate.Today website. As part of the interactive nature of Educate.Today, we welcome submissions from teachers and students to publish on the website and extend the conversation to more teachers and students as they visit the website. If you are interested in potentially having one of your student videos published on the website, contact us at info@educate.today and put “Publishing Cassius Theater Video” in the title line.

Activity Idea 2: History and a Play

This activity can be done by individual students, students in small groups, or an entire class.

Activity Process: This play is based on events in Cassius Clay's young life and on his family and friends at the time as well as the events happening in America at the time. In his interview (Theater 41: Meet the Playwright), Mr. Goodwin talks about his interest in history and the process of balancing theatrical concepts with historic accuracy in the process of writing the play. Have students view the interview to hear Mr. Goodwin's ideas.

The three scenes that are available to view on our Educate.Today website approach this balance of theatrical needs and history in different ways:

In Theater 43: Scene 1, we see Cassius meet Officer Joe Martin. This event actually happened, but no transcript is available for what was actually said or how it occurred.

In Theater 44: Scene 2, we see Cassius learn of the death of Emmett Till. The murder of Emmett Till did occur and a young Cassius Clay, his friends, and their families would have heard about it.

In Theater 45: Scene 3, we see Cassius and his friend Eddie are denied service in a "whites only" restaurant even though Cassius has been given the key to the city by the Mayor of Louisville after his triumph at the Olympics. Events like this definitely occurred in Louisville of the 1960's.

Have students view any or all of the scenes and discuss the intersection of theater and history that occurs in the scenes. Some questions to consider for the discussion:

1. How important do you think it is to be historically accurate when writing a play about a specific person or event? How would you go about balancing the need for dramatic tension, the creation of characters, and moving the play's plot along as needed with the issue of historic accuracy?
2. Would the type of play you are writing or the audience for whom it is intended change any of your thinking in regard to the first question above?
3. Do you think a playwright could approach the balance of history and writing differently for a scene like the first one that is depicting an event that happened but no one knows what was said versus the second one that must include accurate information about the death of Emmett Till? Why or why not?
4. In scenes like the first and the third one where there is no record of what was actually said, how do you think the playwright creates the dialogue that has the feeling of accuracy and also conveys the meaning of the scene and relationship of the characters?
5. How well do you think Mr. Goodwin has done in creating scenes that are dramatically appealing and also historically accurate? Thinking as a theater critic, how would you evaluate his work? Thinking as an historian, how would you evaluate his work? Thinking as an actor, how would you evaluate his work? Thinking as a director, how would you evaluate his work?

Activity Variations:

1. In addition to discussing the intersection of theater and history and evaluating the scenes in the play, have students create a scene based on an historic event or an event that happened in their lives that they have information about. Have students research as needed to be sure of the original story as much as possible and then write a short scene depicting the event. Have students edit and refine the scene as needed. As they work on revisions, have other students read each scene aloud and offer their evaluation of how the process is going. Determine a time for "final copy" and final

reading of the scene. Have students discuss and evaluate each other's work. Potential discussion questions could include:

- a. What was the process like to write a scene that was both historically accurate and dramatically coherent?
- b. How did they take the information they researched and create the dialogue and setting needed for the scene? What was easy? What was difficult?
- c. From a theatrical perspective, how successful do they find their final product? From a historical perspective, how successful do they find their final product?

2. Have students read other plays or scenes from other plays that dramatize an historic event or include historic individuals. Based on reading the scenes only, what do they learn about the history of the situation? Based on reading the scenes only, what do they think about the writing of the play, the dramatic tension, the character development, etc.? For further investigation, have students learn about the history of the actual event and/or the individuals involved. Questions for them to consider could include:

- a. What, if anything, do they learn that the play did not tell them?
- b. Were important or interesting pieces of information left out of the play?
- c. Was the history of the event changed in any way in the play?
- d. Why do they think the playwright might have made the choices he/she did?
- e. Does this additional knowledge in any way change their response to the play?

3. If students have written dramatic scenes of their own based on an historic event, consider submitting a PDF version that would be appropriate for publication on our Educate.Today website. As part of the interactive nature of Educate.Today, we welcome submissions from teachers and students to publish on the website and extend the conversation to more teachers and students as they visit the website. If you are interested in potentially having one of your student scenes published on the website, contact us at info@educate.today and put "Publishing Cassius Theater Scene" in the title line.

Activity Idea 3: Responding to Scenes from the Play

This activity can be done by individual students, students in small groups, or an entire class.

Activity Process: Have students view any or all of the three scenes from the play (Theater 43: Scene 1; Theater 44: Scene 2; Theater 45: Scene 3) included on the Educate.Today website and then respond to them via discussion or written response. Possible avenues for evaluation/response include:

1. Responding from an “actor” perspective: Have students view the scenes from the point of view of an actor. Potential questions to consider include:
 - a. What did they like/dislike about any particular performance?
 - b. Did they notice any specific choices made by an actor or actress that they felt was especially appropriate or strong?
 - c. The three scenes occur at different periods of time and ages in the lives of the main characters of Eddie and Cassius. Did they notice any changes in the performances of those two actors that seemed to embody that change of time or age?
 - d. Are there specific moments in the scenes they would play differently?
 - e. Are there specific actions/gestures/emotions they would do differently? If so, why?

2. Responding from a “director” perspective: Have students view the scenes from the point of view of the director. Potential questions to consider include:
 - a. What did they think about how the scenes were staged?
 - b. What blocking worked well? What blocking would they modify? Why?
 - c. How was the scene paced?
 - d. What was their response to the emotional texture of the scene?
 - e. As a director, what kind of instructions would you have given your actors about playing any of the three scenes?

3. Responding from a “technical” perspective: Have students view the scenes from the point of view of a lighting designer or costume designer. Potential questions to consider include:
 - a. What did they notice about the lighting and/or costuming choices?
 - b. What about the lighting or costuming did they think was especially effective?
 - c. Did anything about either lighting or costuming seem “off” to them?
 - d. Did the costumes seem to be of the appropriate period? How did the costumes “fit” the characters? How did the costumes “fit” the actors?
 - e. What did they notice about the design of the theatre space, entrances, exits, etc., that they believe would have influenced choices made by the lighting designer? What specific examples can they see? How would a different performance space have potentially influenced choices made in the lighting design?

4. Responding from a “theater critic” perspective. Have students view the scenes from the point of view of a theater critic. Potential questions to consider include:
 - a. If you were reviewing the production for your school newspaper based on what you have seen in these three scenes, what would that review say? What were strengths of the production? What were weaknesses? Why would you choose to emphasize those points for readers of your school newspaper?

b. If you were reviewing the production for your community/city newspaper based on what you have seen in these three scenes, what would that review say? What were the strengths of the production? What were weaknesses? Why would you choose to emphasize those points to the general public?

5. Responding from an “audience” perspective. Have students view the scenes from the point of view of someone attending the performance. Potential questions to consider include:

a. What did you like about the performance? Why?

b. Was there anything you disliked about the performance? Why?

c. Did the play’s subject matter and themes make you think of any related incidents in your own life or in current American life? If so, what were they? Why, do you think, those incidents came to your mind as you viewed the scenes?

d. Based on viewing these three scenes, would you recommend reading the play or attending a production of the play to other people? Why or why not?

Activity Variations:

1. Consider having students submit a PDF or short video of their response to the scenes from either the “theater critic” or “audience” perspective. PDFs should be no longer than two pages and videos should be no longer than 60 seconds. Please be sure that the submission is appropriate for the website’s audience. As part of the interactive nature of Educate.Today, we welcome submissions from teachers and students to publish on the website and extend the conversation to more teachers and students as they visit the website. If you are interested in potentially having one of your student videos or PDFs published on the website, contact us at info@educate.today and put “Publishing Cassius Theater Response” in the title line.

Activity Idea 4: What did you learn from the cast and director?

This activity can be done by individual students, students in small groups, or an entire class.

Activity Process: Have students view the interview (Theater 42: Meet the Players) with the director and cast of Metro Theater Company’s production of “And In this Corner...Cassius Clay” that is available on the website. After viewing the interview have students respond to any of the questions below, as well as questions of your own creation, in written form or through small group or whole class discussion.

1. Did you gain any insights into the process of directing a play from hearing the director and cast talk about this production? What are examples of insights that you gained?
2. Did you gain any insights into working as an ensemble from viewing the interview? What are examples of insights that you gained?
3. Did you gain any insights into an actor developing a character as a result of watching the interview? What are examples of insights that you gained?
4. Did you gain any insights into the differences or similarities of inhabiting a character based on a real person as opposed to an entirely fictional person? What are examples of insights that you gained?
5. During part of the interview the director talks about the scenic design for the production and why that design was chosen. You see some visual examples of that design in action during the interview and also in each of the three scenes from the production also available on the website. After hearing the director speak and viewing the scenes, what is your response to the set/stage design of the production? How effective was it? How might you have done it differently in the same performance space? How might you have designed it for your school’s performance space? In the interview with the playwright Idris Goodwin, he talks about the “cinematic” nature of the script he wrote for this play. How do you think this factor influenced the set/stage design of the production? How well do you think the design reflected or enhanced (or failed to) this concept?

Activity Variations:

1. Based on any of the starter questions above or ones of your own, have students create a short video answering the question (60 seconds maximum) that would be appropriate for publication on our Educate.Today website. As part of the interactive nature of Educate.Today, we welcome submissions from teachers and students to publish on the website and extend the conversation to more teachers and students as they visit the website. If you are interested in potentially having one of your student videos published on the website, contact us at info@educate.today and put “Publishing Cassius Theater Discussion Video” in the title line.

Activity Idea 5: What did you learn about fight choreography?

This activity can be done by individual students, students in small groups, or an entire class.

Activity Process: Have students view the interview about the play’s fight choreography (Theater 46: On Boxing and Fight Choreography) that is included on the Educate.Today website. After viewing the video, have them respond to any combination of the questions below in written form or via conversation in small groups or as an entire class.

1. Did you learn anything about the process for ensuring safe and effective fight choreography in a play that you didn’t know before? What was that information?
2. Have you ever been a participant in fight choreography in a theatrical production? What was that experience like for you? What did you enjoy about it? What were challenges you faced? How did you overcome those challenges?
3. If you could offer any advice to someone participating in a fight scene in a play, what would it be? Why would you offer that advice?

Activity Variations:

1. Based on any of the starter questions above or ones of your own, have students create a short video answering the question (60 seconds maximum) that would be appropriate for publication on our Educate.Today website. As part of the interactive nature of Educate.Today, we welcome submissions from teachers and students to publish on the website and extend the conversation to more teachers and students as they visit the website. If you are interested in potentially having one of your student videos published on the website, contact us at info@educate.today and put “Publishing Fight Choreography Video” in the title line.