

## **Performing Arts report 2020/21 Academic Year**

### **Members of our Department:**

**Music:** Susan Glass, Nick Wight, Damon DueWhite, Carrie Nichols, Aedin Larkin.

**Drama:** Joan Jubett, Joanne Magee

**Dance:** Kristina Walton, Deborah Damast, Peggy Peloquin.

This year was particularly challenging for the performing arts department as our programs were understandably compromised and re-imagined in several ways in order to meet the needs of our students during the global pandemic. Many of us taught very different classes. In the LS, specialists were extremely limited. We all were unable to provide our usual programs so it was very hard to change the actual curriculum if it was not being taught. As we had a priority to revolutionize our programs as we adapted to the spaces, the remote times and the constraints, we also worked as best we could on the following process. We hope to continue with more time and focus in the years to come as this year was especially herculean for the performing arts.

- **Review current departmental work for racial/cultural/class biases in curriculum and practice.**
- **Identify areas that need change. Identify how to hold ourselves accountable.**
- **Make changes to our practice and curriculum; document those changes**
- **Identify how to continue and deepen this work year to year.**
- **Iterative process: report back to DEI, leadership teams and see what else is needed**

**These questions were presented to us by the DEI team and we have answered them in narrative form.**

### **What did I take into consideration in choosing my course materials?**

**LS MUSIC:** What do the kids leave with after my work is done? RE-imagine what my curriculum is like - what can I do that's fun, and they're going to miss music ( they get me for a week this year) - see what they're doing - what are they listening to at home? First grade:

Lot of body percussion and speech stuff - steady beat, kid joined in doing something on the table - went into improv, called in one by one, some would clap, some would bang on table. Trying to find a connection with them. That's my lens this year. Where are they musically, and bringing from home/from culture

**MS MUSIC: 5th and 6th Grade Music:** As a new teacher this year, the music will be created in the 5th/6th grade curriculum, as the teacher designs, they will look at DEI more closely. Music from a perspective not centering around the western way.

How do we look at music? Doing a unit on music in **our** lives. Asking questions. What music is important to you? What **is** music? Ethnomusicologists - pulling in resources from a variety of different perspectives. Course materials. So much benefit to bringing up the decolonization aspect.

**MS DRAMA:** For 5th and 6th grade students I help develop their bodies and voices as their tools for self expression and creativity. I help them work as a team and learn empathy and cooperation. In 5th grade I use scripts where children are the center of the story and are often the heroes, teaching self advocacy and encouraging the power to make change. I create opportunities for growth in confidence and self empowerment.

In 6th grade I work on "the story we tell." Helping students become critical thinkers in how they are "told a story" through media, news, advertising, television and movies. Through using different perspectives we are able to tell a story in a variety of ways, learning that "truth" is not always clear and that we must be aware of how much information is shaped for us. In this work I take into consideration the way America and the rest of the world has been fed information that perpetuates a white centrist/ supremacist narrative.

In 7th and 8th grade, we explore world theatre and also the history of American theater which was written often with a white centrist view that had glossed over inequities, exploitation and the exclusion of others. I consider each individual student and ask how I can best reach them with relatable details of the past and to inspire them to feel empowered to explore African American playwrights and dramatists when looking at American theatre history. My focus is to develop empathy as well as creativity, imagination and empowerment to express and articulate what is meaningful through dramatic play, writing and research. I want each student to feel seen and heard and to give them many opportunities for self expression and individuation.

**MS/ HS MUSIC: BAND** With my history with racism, with me, seeking diversity and inclusion. Cultural appropriation conversations with my classes. Discussing people not getting credit for what was stolen from them.

**HS MUSIC:** Things are different this year, wanting to meet where they are. Redesign classes because of covid. Bring more historical elements, cultural attributes - asking them a lot to bring in what they're listening to. Kendrick Lamar for example. Kids making connections. Both students of color and white students don't know about context history. Give students tools - get them the materials. Equity of that is essential. Instruments fill a need.

**MS / HS VOCALS:** We are in a group - instrumental music, not "throwing out the baby with bathwater." Something bothering her about not including Vivaldi, for instance. Origin of Banjo

- Throw Down your heart. Notion of bridging in the arts, Church music/born out of pain and suffering. Breaking down barriers of genres, similarities but also differences between a black church music versus choral music. Identifying with the pain in the black community. Concert closers - "whitewashed" (singing with joy versus conversation with history).

Difference between "studying" material versus "performance practice". Bringing in experts to show authenticity. No spirituals.

**MS DANCE 7th and 8th Grade:** Have been on leave, starting in January looking at curriculum and incorporating the lineage of dance. Identity webs with 7th graders - "This book is anti-racist." What do you think you identify with - bringing in guests artists virtually and experts in the field. Like bringing in Godfrey. Bring an expert in - okay with teaching aspects, not an expert so bringing in someone from that place.

**9th Grade DANCE:** Social emotional identity piece - with arts we need to approach this here. Present materials where students see themselves and provide opportunities for collaboration as a means for valuing, understanding, learning together to create community and bonding.

**HS DANCE:** What are we giving our kids? Articulate that ballet is a western form. Raising awareness and not assuming that anything is the way it is. Having remote & virtual guest artists.

## **How do my course materials reflect my current students?**

**LS MUSIC:** I try to ask students about the music they listen to in the homes and with their families. I make sure that my library is diverse, that the books and poems we read represent my students. When a child makes a connection to a piece of music, I allow them the space to share what they know. Anything I teach that is not from my culture, I try to have done a lot of research and I begin the introduction with some background and an acknowledgement that this song/dance/piece of music is not from my culture.

**HS MUSIC** I never quite know who my students will be as I prepare. I am always hopeful that I will have an ethnically and racially diverse group of students. Since my classes are always small, the sense of "groupness" is important to the dynamic. Through my summer research, I was able to design my course with additional focus on the issues I describe above. I was happy to see a diverse group of students in both of my sections. I made sure that the material I presented reflected my additional focus. I also am allowing a wide variety of choices of topics for individual projects, so that students' diverse perspectives could be shared with the group (all presentations are in front of the whole class.) So far it's really borne fruit.

**HS MUSIC** About half of my students change each trimester. Most are white and have a modern, wide ranging, eclectic taste in music, but generally lack a depth of historical/musical knowledge and context to important social/cultural/global movements that they learn about in other electives (regardless of their racial identity). My course materials aim to round out their appreciation and ability to connect musical concepts, disciplines and creativity to the bigger picture, and ideally influence their collaborations/group project choices. Regarding 'tangible' materials, a lot of my energy goes towards creating a well maintained studio space and accessible instruments (& recording gear/accessories). I find this crucial, particularly to facilitate both project and ensemble work, so there's less time fiddling with broken gear and more time playing/learning.

**MS DRAMA:** Development of the student's voice, body, empathy and imagination is the starting point and once I can assess who my students are, I find material that is relatable and also educational to use drama as a vehicle to explore human nature. I match scene study to individuals and groups that have identity/ friendships in common. I move fluidly between original work generated by students and scripts that explore relatable characters and stories.

**HS DRAMA:** Students change every trimester. It's a constant jumping through hoops/learning about who they are: once I have students I've known for a while, I try hard to find material that might reflect them or give them a perspective they've never been exposed to. 9th grade this year feels very different: We are doing a lot of interviewing/collaborating/original writing and group improvisation. When I show them theater links, I try to show a variety of productions that reflect different perspectives/backgrounds but also vary in style.

**LS DANCE:** I am teaching the fours now, and I believe that the majority of the children are white. I think developmentally, my course materials are very appropriate to their ages, and I am working on providing windows and mirrors for them through course materials. I will move to the Ks next week for a month but only see each class pod for one week (one or two movement classes per week) so I am teaching more like master visiting class formats for them rather than a curriculum.

**MS DANCE** Currently the 7th and 8th graders are delving into the art of choreography. Students picked a choreographer using the Jacob's Pillow Dance Interactive online portal, and did research on that choreographer, picking up on choreographic devices they see in their dances. Using this knowledge students have been creating their own dances based on the choreographer they chose and three words from their identity webs/maps (which they have done in academic classes). They chose three words that they believe best describes how they identify themselves (not how others perceive them). Using this format, they created a short phrase, got into (socially distanced) groups and shared their phrases to create one cohesive piece based on their identities. I am then giving them varying choreographic devices to change their dances. While doing this we are talking about our personal identities and lineage, and bringing that back to the lineage of different dance styles and choreographers. Many have found out that the lineage of many dance styles,

here in the U.S., came from slaves who came from west africa. This will be an ongoing project as we delve into varying styles of dance and connecting them to their roots.

**HS DANCE:** Each group of 9<sup>th</sup> graders has varying levels of engagement. I see this as a measure of different things. Such as, interest, ability, inclusion, levels of comfort ,group dynamics and time of day. The syllabus includes several projects that are created in partners and small groupings. Putting students in groups where they are the most engaged, and productive, is dynamic and an ongoing process. At this time,I am hyper aware of the students' need to connect with one another. Before covid students did three projects in groups. This is not possible now. To that point, I create many breakout rooms so students are collaborating and creating together.

### **How do my course materials reflect the students I hope to serve?**

**HS Drama:** I would like to have my course materials serve more students of color. I think I may need to explicitly name plays that are going to be read that year (without thinking about what will be performed, that gets tricky) so that students might see themselves reflected in the course description. 100%. I think there is an assumption and upheld narrative that non-musicals are only for white people. It's what is mainly reflected on Broadway and Off-Broadway. It's what gets published/seen. So, I'm not surprised that students might think that.

**MS DRAMA:** I am constantly striving to match my materials with the students. This means from year to year everything can change. I look for age appropriate material that is inclusive and allows us to explore lives outside of our own as well as lives that reflect who we are. The challenge is to find scripts that can be studied and performed - so often we can study a script but not act it out as the population of the class does not represent the characters in the plays. I continue to read and explore throughout my career searching for the ideal material for the students in my classes. Another challenge is to find well written material that is appropriate for middle school students.

**MS DANCE.** I hope as I build this course and its units throughout the year, that this class can help encompass students from varying backgrounds, and show them that dance is a part of almost all cultures and their personal lineage and identities. I think it's important to help make that personal connection with students. Whether it's a student who identifies as Black, Indian, Asian, White, Latin x, etc., I want them to see themselves in dance and the dance world. Show them that the root of many forms of dance, although may look "white" on the screen or stage, are actually predominantly coming from non-white lineage. I also want students to feel comfortable doing any form of dance and not seeing it as "this is white dance" and "this is black dance." Also by using free online resources whether it is Jacob's Pillow interactive or YouTube, students of all socioeconomic backgrounds can fully participate in this research.

**LS MUSIC:** I try to ask students about the music they listen to in the homes and with their families. I make sure that my library is diverse, that the books and poems we read represent my students. When a child makes a connection to a piece of music, I allow them the space to share what they know. Anything I teach that is not from my culture, I try to have done a lot of research and I begin the introduction with some background and an acknowledgement that this song/dance/piece of music is not from my culture.

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**HS MUSIC** My course materials/content "reflect themselves", meaning, everything under the jazz, blues and soul umbrella is born out of the African diaspora. Particularly the African American experience. I hope that learning about this content serves those students of color who may not be aware of how much cross-cultural/racial collaboration is out there, and by appreciating what an important role POC played in shaping pop culture. All of this without resorting to examples that follow the deficit model. More specifically (to students of color), I hope that my course materials shine light on cultural lineage and how it might relate to their personal experience (i.e. Latin X student sees how much influence Afro-Caribbean music had on jazz/pop/soul collaborations since the 1940's... and uses this new knowledge as a concept for musical project/collaboration). Tangibly, my course materials aim to serve those that don't own or cannot afford an instrument and equipment (no matter race/economic status), through use and lending of school gear to help bring their projects to life.

### **How is attention to diverse perspectives in course content distinct from diversity engagement? Does your work reflect this distinction?**

**HS DRAMA:** I am thinking a lot about student choice. I'm thinking about student narratives. My work is still jumbled around these distinctions, if I am understanding the question correctly.

**MS DRAMA:** The more material I can draw from a wide range of dramatists, the stories allow us to dive into worlds less explored. Through studying character, circumstances and outcomes, students are able to ruminate in a variety of diverse perspectives. Gaining student feedback and opinions is vital here. Material from other cultures, even other worlds allow freedom of imagination and often open the mind to a range of alternative perspectives. I need to continue to challenge myself in this area and continue to seek

diverse perspectives in my materials and how students view and discuss what they are exploring with me. For 14 years I have been taking all middle school students to *The New Victory Theater*. Their educational program is outstanding. These productions expose students to a wide range of performances from around the world. We have teaching artists visiting and workshops with students. We also attend innovative/experimental productions that allow students to see a new form of expression and use of drama to explore identity and culture.

**MS/ HS MUSIC** Teaching style versus content. I am reflecting more on my practice as it relates to how much am I "presenting material" vs. how much time the students are discussing with each other. It's challenging for me to let go of the reins, especially remotely. On Zoom, I try to spend part of each class having them go to breakout rooms with each other and discuss their reactions to a film clip, an interview, a composer's style, etc. They do better with prompts than having open ended discussion. When they return to share, I am trying to make sure that we don't hear from the same people all the time. Or from me! Any real back and forth dialogue as a full group is hard in both venues (live/masked/outside vs. zoom) "Courageous conversations" are harder in this environment but that is my goal.

**HS MUSIC:** My space contains positive multicultural images and that I have put more energy/focus into diverse perspectives for my course content than I have in refining my teaching method/style. I will revisit this one in more depth.

**MS DANCE:** To reiterate what I mentioned in the last question, I think it is important to include a diverse perspective on course materials, even if that means changing how I am teaching a specific style of dance. This will happen by really looking at the lineage of varying styles of dance and also taking into perspective the students' lineage and identity. I think my work includes both a diverse perspective and diversity engagement, especially as I rework my curriculum.

**HS DANCE:** I take into consideration Eurocentrism in what is being taught. My training with some exceptions has been mostly Eurocentric. Broadening and learning with the students supports risk taking. I think about how students might be able to both identify and go beyond what they already know and perhaps go beyond their own biases. For example, sharing videos of other abled dancers. At the same time when viewing and learning movement in many contexts, awareness of cultural appropriation is a constant practice.

### **How does my syllabus reflect the desire to foster an inclusive classroom community?**

**HS DRAMA:** I think my weekly reflections/mini observations help to foster that. I do wonder if I can find a way to continue this work in small groups so that students can feel seen and heard by one another (versus conversing with me).

**MS DRAMA:** Through the simple physical structure of a circle (all equal in the space at all times), routine warm-ups, games and activities that include all students I am able to create an inclusive classroom environment. Activities and assignments always include discussions both in small groups and whole groups. We foster relationships in the classroom that allow us to challenge what is being learned/ taught and what is created. The majority of activities require students to draw from their own lives and experiences. We validate all experiences and value everyone's contributions. We leave no student out of the need to contribute. The work is examined through a variety of discussions and perspectives in the classroom.

**HS DANCE:** Each class begins with a check in with students' emotional, mental and physical states. The somatic experiences that students participate in, are more specific to anatomy, self-discovery, sensory investigation and physical ability. Experiential and exploratory structured improvisations have been interesting in the new Zoom landscape. Guiding students through an exploration with their cameras off, supports a deeper, less self-conscious more embodied experience. Dance inherently expresses diverse perspectives. The challenge is how many aspects, forms and styles can I include in the short time we have together?

**MS DANCE:** In every class I make sure that every student's voice is heard, whether through movement or in class discussions. By bringing in identity webs/maps, students have been able to use movement/dance as a means to express their identities while sharing it with their classmates. Small (socially distanced) group work has helped create a strong classroom bond.

Making the work "public" has been a big factor for my groups. We support and learn from each other by making all projects "presentational", so that all students see the work of their peers. As the recorded work is coming through, I am playing selected recordings for the class, so that we can all celebrate the skill, talent, and hard work of diverse students in the class.

### **How does my pedagogy reflect intentional efforts to engage diverse and/or underrepresented populations?**

**HS DRAMA:** Honestly, I need help with this question. I need more time to think about this. I do know that ensemble work is at the heart of theatre, and so students bring their whole selves to the process, but I can't think beyond this right now.

**MS DRAMA:** I am student centered in my approach. I ask myself, do my students feel heard? Do they feel that I care about them? Do they feel seen? As a foreigner to America I feel that my interests in each student are genuine with a high level of mindfulness in the perspectives of my native country and naivety/ lack of assumptions (or challenged assumptions) in the perspectives and experiences of my students. My "otherness" despite my whiteness allows me to never assume I know who my students are. I need to continue to work on this.



**MS/ HS MUSIC** My curriculum and hopefully my pedagogy has deliberately engaged those underrepresented groups and their contributions to my subject matter. The dilemmas remain as to who can perform this material.

### **How does my curriculum acknowledge various perspectives and/or voids within the field?**

**HS DRAMA:** This is a great question and opportunity. Again, I'm not sure I'm there to answer this question yet. We See You White American Theatre (came about this summer) may be something to add to the curriculum over ALL courses.

**MS DRAMA:** I have worked hard this year on addressing the voids that exist- my mantra is that I continue to be transparent in what I don't know, in what I have not yet explored and that my perspective is only one in many. That I teach what I am enthusiastic about in the hopes that it instills a love of learning and exploration in what we don't know yet.

**HS DANCE:** This is a work in progress, As a white cis-gendered, European American, able bodied, older adult. I only have my experience to pull from . I constantly feel that access to materials and experiences with BIPOC inclusive and center is a challenge. When we were in the building I was able to bring in teachers from more diverse experiences. I feel a great need to improve on this.

### **Make changes to our practice and curriculum; document those changes;**

Below are narratives on how we have made changes to our practice. This is an ongoing process that will continue to evolve. They are examples of our curriculum changes or a confirmation of how we feel we are successful in the directives.

#### **HS- Dance 9**

Dance for the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in the present hybrid schedule is about 12 classes. Half of the classes are remote and the classes that are in school also have remote learners. My curriculum has had to change and I am adapting to each group of learners. In this time of Covid 19, student's social and emotional needs are addressed by a check-in, in every class. This also unifies the at home and in school separation. This is done sometimes in the group and sometimes in a chat and sometimes in a private chat. At this time, opportunities for students to move, feel playful and creative and apply this attitude to a low stress social learning environment has felt important.

My focus has been on presenting material where students can see themselves and dance as a universal activity that functions in many different ways. Student identity

formation is something I hold in my awareness and the DEI focus is a constant reflection of who is center, and how will this class include and invite? I have a constant practice of being aware of my Whiteness and the importance of emotional connection with students. I also reflect on ways that I may be expressing unconscious biases or wanting to be the “good” white educator. Again emotional awareness is paramount.

Students look at the different ways that dance functions as a physical discipline and performing art, as well as social dance and social movements. In the beginning of the term we focused on acquiring movement through an, at home, off camera, movement exploration. Students created repeatable movement phrases with their found movement. For example; Sweep, lift a chair, shake out a sheet, wipe a table, Open/ close a window (kind of like housework). By abstracting everyday movement and applying dance concepts, students create dance phrases together to create movement studies.

Students are presently focusing on Master KG Dance challenge with the song “Jeruselma” that originated in South Africa and now communities around the world have participated as a way of finding joy and coming together during Covid. Many different groups of people from around the world have participated. Students have learned the basic dance and are creating their own variations in small, distanced groups in class and in breakout rooms.

I find the hybrid teaching the most challenging. It can feel as if the students at home are locked in the little boxes while those in school have a big place to move in. Creating parody in the class experience is a constant challenge.

## LS MUSIC

4's/ K / Chorus

I have been working with the early childhood classes for the last few months. As I only have a week with each of them I wanted to connect to what was already happening in the classroom and create a more meaningful interdisciplinary experience for the children. I have been using literacy and books as an entry point into my lessons. During music class, I have been working on making sure I hear every child's voice, and to be mindful of the names that I am calling out. I am working to bring in family traditions and culture into my lessons and I have a bigger plan for this next year. I am making sure to offer choices and give students opportunities for feedback and reflection regularly.

The **4's** were beginning their family studies and so I used the book *Your Name is a Song* by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow as our starting point. I landed on this book, because not only does it feature names from all over the world and how it is important to learn their

pronunciation, but it was also written by a woman of color and the illustrations reflect the author. I was able to then talk about the names within our class. The children worked to figure out the number of syllables in their names, we then transferred that to instruments. We haven't finished yet but I would love for the 4's to explore all the names in their families and then eventually transfer the rhythms to improvise melodies in pentatonic on the xylophones. The 4's also learned about the change maker Stevie Wonder and we used his song *Sir Duke* to practice steady beat through movement and rhythm sticks.

In **Kindergarten** we looked at the book *Rap a Tap Tap: Here's Bojangles - Think of That!* By Leo and Diane Dillon. This book describes the life of a "ground-breaking African-American tap dancer. Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was one of the most popular entertainers of the 1920s-30s". As it was Black History Month, I talked about Bill Robinson as a changemaker. The book itself is very rhythmic. We use the text and the illustrations to create a two part rhythmic ostinati piece and a movement composition.

**Lower School Chorus** (Which will be happening in the Spring!) - Franklin Willis is an amazing music educator and he wrote a round for elementary aged kids called *Be the Light* based on Amanda Gorman's poem. Excited to teach this and to support the work of BIPOC.

### **MS/HS vocal music and the HS musical**

Update from what I wrote below -- all of the thoughts I wrote about in the fall are still ruminating as I teach different students in the High School. In 10th grade vocal music, I have a very small class, 5 students, only three who are in-person. Different units in this class relate to different genres of vocal music. Vocal Jazz being the first unit, the material is strongly rooted in African American artists and composers. While I present several songs, the students each choose a song to prepare, practice, record. All chose songs that were recorded and made.

### **MS Drama**

In Summary: I have changed my lens. I have unlearned and relearned. I have become transparent in my learning alongside my class. I have eliminated offensive material and included new material that is inclusive and representative of the true 'America'. I have pushed African-American dramatists to the forefront of the curriculum this year. I have adapted this year's scene work to have students take ownership of their expression and encourage autobiographical expression in their writing. I continue to review and refine all my teaching to become more proficient in inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. It's a start.

Here is a longer summary of my journey thus far:

My curriculum is on a two year rotation and this year I usually teach Melodrama, Vaudeville, and then move into American Playwrights and select scenes for students to study including reading the whole play. They usually end with a performance in April. It is worth noting that my priority this year was addressing my whiteness in my teaching, and that I have been always striving to teach through the lens that acknowledges race, gender, sexual identity, religious ideology, ability, socioeconomic differences, but that I specifically wanted to

address my white centric nature and re-form my thinking in my work. The changes I made were first to look at my resources and review them with the lens of inclusivity, de-centering the "white perspective" and asking if this history is a true depiction of the history of how theatre evolved in NYC and the rest of America. I also looked to sharpen my sensitivity to the students of color in my class. Additionally I wanted to encourage students' ownership of their work and a personal connection to it.

I discovered that the text book I had read on Melodrama often talked about typical America, the American Dream, the American way...I made changes to the wording in my own teaching, talking specifically about certain immigrants, certain cultures and included a parallel comparison of what African Americans were experiencing on the same time line. We studied "The Poor of New York" which was deeply relevant regarding the great depression and I felt confident in that area having students read the play both out loud in groups and also quietly for a different type of focus. I chose not to ever use "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as a melodrama that included African-American characters as my research led me down a path of how problematic this text was and how various scholars have expressed the embedded racism within the characterization, the plot and the ultimate lasting message. I was sensitive to my students and deemed the text to be for a more mature group of students, with a more knowledgeable teacher that one day, if they continued to study theatre, they would be able to analyse and dismantle.

What I added was work centered around 4 influential African-American dramatists who were writing in the same era of history: Ira Aldridge (1807-1867), Alice Moore Dunbar- Nelson (1875-1935), Victor Sejour (1817-1874) and William Wells Brown (1814-1884). Because of the nature of remote/hybrid teaching, I chose to ask the students to individually read biographies of each one and summarize the key details of their beginnings, early life, adult life, contribution to theatre and how their work was received and critiqued. Students could see that while one group of white Americans and immigrants to NYC were making theatre, there were Black Americans contributing with a variety of challenges and much of their work was only truly recognised in Europe. Once students had individually studied the dramatists, we were able to share our knowledge and understanding of their work in discussion. I maintained transparency throughout the experience, sharing how I was also discovering how so much of this had previously been overlooked in the textbooks I had been reading.

With our Vaudeville unit, I made the decision to avoid reviewing the Minstrel Shows- in the past I used a book that had a chapter on it and photographs but after much researching, I made a choice to be sensitive to my students that if I offended one student of color through images or information that I personally could not possibly relate to, then, for this developmental age, I would not do so. I mentioned it to acknowledge it, as has now become a more common practice, I encourage any student who is interested, to go home and bring it up with their families and explore individually with the support of their family.

I shared a PBS Documentary on Vaudeville which has several examples of African American performers along with many talents from the huge population of cultures from around the world who were arriving in NYC. In this documentary, students could see almost every

representation of culture and what they contributed to the Vaudeville stages of the Golden Era.

Moving into our exploration American Playwrights, I began with Lorraine Hansberry. I shared a slideshow of a summarized biography of her life and added clips of another PBS documentary but was very aware of images used in montage while describing the civil rights movement. I made the choice to ask students to skip the introduction and also stop at a certain point. This was to be sensitive to my students of color to not be subjected to shocking images of racism and violence. I continue to put myself in the shoes of my students and ask myself "Is it necessary to see this to learn about the playwright? What if my student isn't expecting to see this today? How would I feel if I had no choice over what was presented to me?" Again, developmentally, students at 12 or 13 are still so vulnerable and as a British white teacher, I couldn't possibly understand the impact of seeing the history of American racism.

After learning about Lorraine Hansberry, I shared a trailer of the modern day version of "A Raisin in the Sun". Because the "n" word is used in the play, and the mature concepts of the play, I recommended it to my students and suggested if they wanted to watch it, they could ask their parents to explore it with them. This year there has been much discussion and social disruption with a group of students around the use of the "n" word with an 8th grade student specifically so I was transparent in saying that it was my choice not to make one single student of color uncomfortable by exposing them to this in the classroom. Students even suggested that someone should "beep" out the word or make a student friendly version so that we could share the experience of the play together which I agreed on one level would be a good idea. I also explained that the use of the word within the context of the play was very important to the playwright and it was a pure and true depiction of that moment in our history.

We moved on to study the life and works of August Wilson and "The Pittsburgh Cycle" of 10 plays of each decade of the 20th century. I made a slide show and spoke with enthusiasm about Wilson and his approach and contribution. I shared clips of the stage and film versions of "Fences" and "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" and again, encouraged my students to watch these at home with their families as the use of the "n" word is used, not in hatred, but frequently and I did not want to cause harm. I also taught them about the contribution of Denzel Washington, Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman amongst many other influential Black dramatists in these productions. Denzel has vowed to make a screen version of all 10 of Wilson's plays in his lifetime.

Moving forward, I have not even begun to teach about White American playwrights or their contribution and, with the constraints of this hybrid schedule, I am going to include them at the end of this academic year or next as it's a two year rotation. Currently, I am having students write scenes through a variety of different approaches, asking them to draw upon their own experiences and, with the example of so many of the dramatists they have studied, I am encouraging them to be autobiographical in their writing, encouraging freedom of personal identification and expression. I am sensitive to acknowledging the individual in the class and empowering them to feel ownership of their dramatic work. The

Performing Arts "share" will be the students' original work which should embrace and celebrate their identities and freedom of expression. An example of this is we have been generating scenes regarding disagreements and resolutions. Digging into situations where students can write from personal experiences or border observations. Which may well include issues of hurt and advocacy. It is always important for me to remember that 12 and 13 year olds have wildly different experiences and I strive to meet them at the developmentally appropriate place in their journey. I am dedicated to continue to work on being vigilant and determined to debias my work as a teacher. I see this as a constant evolution that I am excited to be journeying through.

### **HS Theatre**

There's been a lot of processing going on for me so far this trimester (T2). Bringing DEI into the classroom has not just been about curriculum; more importantly it's been a look at my personal biases and blindspots as well as a deeper dive into my practice as a theatre educator and director.

In Art 9 (which is roughly a 5-week rotation only), the major focus of the class has been about building trust among classmates, as the 9th grade has been in the unfortunate position of being distanced for the entire school year. Besides numerous live and online theatre games, I've repeatedly partnered students up for an interview project which requires students to find out as much as possible about one another. They then turn it into a monologue where they "introduce" their partner using a particular "fun" scenario as the frame. In essence I am trying to build empathy and storytelling as a way to share commonalities and differences. Sample interview questions either skim the surface or go deep, and students are given the choice to figure out what they want to ask their partner. The students have expressed their appreciation for any and all chances to get to know their classmates, as they still feel slightly nervous and shy around one another. The end of the drama rotation for 9th grade ends with a 4 person scene that the students write themselves (though they are given a prompt). They tend to have fun writing and collaborating on an original devised piece no matter the quality of the outcome, and they get a kick out of recording their scenes for the upcoming "share". Lastly (as with every one of my classes), I require a weekly "mini observation" where I ask students to turn in a reflection about what they are learning in the class. They have the opportunity to give me feedback about things that are working or not working for them, and I encourage them to think beyond themselves and notice how other students are inspiring them. I include the Art 9 description in the DEI summary, because I feel like it's important to think about the structure and progression of the students in their 4 years of HS arts. I'm curious about how to incorporate methods that build 'ensemble', feel less "top down," and encourage students to feel agency with their creativity and expression.

In my T2 Art 10 class we read *I and You* by Lauren Gunderson and *Everybody* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. Gunderson's 2-character play calls for 2 people not of the same racial background. I'm not sure why she asks for this in her casting, and I actually question it, though I can understand that she wants two people who might have a bit less in common than more. The racial makeup of my Art 10 class this year is much more diverse than any

other class I've taught at LREI. It's been a fun project to work on and the students seem to enjoy the play and its hidden message. It's great acting material for teenagers to tackle. With *Everybody*, we watched a few introductory videos about Jacobs-Jenkins, who is both hilarious and unapologetic about tackling race in a number of his plays. While *Everybody* touches on race less than his other plays (it's actually a retelling of the morality play *Everyman* and it's very funny), overall I think I've learned that the body of the work of Jacobs-Jenkins would be better suited for an Art 11/12 class. It's dense and satirical and I think the older students would be able to analyze the work in ways the 10th grade may not be ready for. I'm learning that the 10th graders mainly want (and need) a place to play and express themselves so I want to shift my DEI thinking to be more conscious of grade-level appropriate material. (This isn't to say that 11th and 12th shouldn't have that place to play and express - absolutely they should - but they are usually thinking about the bigger picture and can tackle the harder questions.)

In my 2 sections of Art 11/12, we have spent a lot of time on Anna Devere Smith's documentary play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* which, through monologues, highlights the stories of Rodney King, Latasha Harlins, Reginald Denny, the unrest and destruction in L.A, and the trials and aftermath surrounding these events. This has been a very rewarding play to read and discuss. We discussed identity and representation, and analyzed Anna Devere Smith's tour de force performance in the PBS special (she plays all of the roles). One major question arose: what does it mean to play a character of a different identity than yours, especially when the play is tackling race and identity head on? Students have had a multitude of opinions around this topic. They are currently working on monologues from the play, and I've been careful to ask them to select a character close to/in line with their racial identities. This has been an interesting conversation for students with multiple racial/ethnic identities and something that I did not foresee and would like to dig into more, next time I teach the class. We have students of color in both classes, but we do not have any black students, and the missing presence is felt. This also raises the question about being a white teacher introducing a play by a playwright of color. What is the impact behind this intent and what kind of freefall might I have when I'm not initially accountable to my colleagues and students of color? I was careful to warn students about sections of the PBS film that showed the documentary footage of violence towards Rodney King, Latasha Harlins and Reginald Denny (I gave them the time stamps so they could stop and skip to the next section). I let them know that they should absolutely skip over any and all of those sections if needed. But this begged larger questions about my choice of the play in the first place. Might this be too heavy for students? Besides the play being incredibly topical, what were my other reasons for choosing this play out of all the plays I might choose? Should those of us who are white teachers vet our curriculum choices with the department and/or colleagues of color? Or should we just continue to report our findings in order to avoid burdening our colleagues of color? We also read 'The *Thanksgiving Play*' by Larissa Fasthorse - a satire about overly well-intentioned white people (including a white theatre teacher (!)) making a play around the Thanksgiving holiday. The question of representation is a huge theme of the play and the comedy is meant to poke fun. Students have enjoyed the play and we are working towards creating audio scenes so that we can work on voice characterization. Satirical

characterization of well-intentioned white people again brings up the representation question, and I have to say that despite my many questions *Twilight* and *Thanksgiving Play* are definite companion pieces.

Lastly, I have been thinking about creating an ongoing HS performing arts student advisory committee, which I propose to roll out in T3. I think it's important that we continually hear recommendations from students around a variety of topics (including scheduling, recommendations for performance opportunities etc.). I want to include a DEI arm of the committee which might be able to tackle questions around equity in the classroom, curriculum, representation and overall participation in the performing arts. As always, the fall play and the spring festival are on my mind, but I'm also curious to tackle questions around pedagogy and practice with students in the classroom. I find that this is why my weekly mini-observations have been useful, and I wonder if I can prompt students to think more about what and how they're learning when it comes to theatre. I just ordered the book *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches* edited by Sharrell D. Luckett with Tia M. Shaffer. I'm curious about how my own schooling/methodology affects my teaching and whether learning some new methods might shed some light on my biases.

### **5th/6th Grade MS Music**

In terms of curriculum, in this second trimester we are exploring American music history through the study of New York City performance venues, performers and genres performed. A main objective of this work is to develop an understanding that American music history is rooted in Black music history.

During faculty working groups, I am a part of a group that is exploring how to debias our curriculum through an audit of a unit of study. This group has led to interesting conversations about material choices, the perspectives we include and definitions of terminology. I am fortunate to be engaging with these conversations while also planning and implementing a new curriculum. I know this is just the beginning of my work to understand my own biases and recognize the ways in which they inform my teaching.

## **What Challenges and Opportunities came up?**

### **MS/HS Theatre/ Musical Theatre.**

- How best can we provide opportunities for all students to feel that participating in performing arts is accessible to them if we choose productions and materials that meet the needs of the majority of students but don't represent the population of all students. BIPOC students have been used to playing roles and singing songs that are "white". We find it hard to select material that are for BIPOC students before auditions as we cannot guarantee that they would want to audition or that they would be able to carry the role. Certain productions that do have BIPOC representation exceed the population



of students who like to join the productions so we seem to get stuck in choosing predominantly white plays and musicals.

- How best can we explore texts and music if we want to prioritize the experience of acting and singing in our work but cannot hear the words or songs because our students are not BIPOC.? What ways can we retrain our brains and change our approach to this challenge without losing a valuable connection to the ways we were used to exploring material in a performance class?
- As we move into the future, should a white director invite a BIPOC co-director to direct a piece of theatre for BIPOC students? Perhaps in the Spring Festival in the HS?
- Opportunities for professional development with a specific focus on DEI would be useful. Funds to bring in guest artists would be wonderful.

### **What are our goals?**

- To continue to plan and implement curriculum and materials that have been through a regular and rigorous debiasing process acknowledging race, gender, sexual identity, religious ideology, ability, socioeconomic differences. Using the wide range of resources given to us, we will continue to check ourselves and one another.
- To continue to research articles and materials pertaining to our performing arts and to pursue further exposure and education when possible in order to keep up to date with the ever changing landscape of inclusion and diversity.
- To meet with LRE's new Diversity Director on a regular basis when planning and choosing material and to work towards solutions to meeting the needs of our students when journeying through selections for performance.
- To share information and ideas with one another to remain transparent and see vulnerability as a strength when approaching issues around equity, representation and inclusion.
- To keep in touch regularly with our division directors with innovative ideas to meet the needs of our students and to gain transparency in the desires of the administrators.
- To create ways to check in regularly with our students providing opportunities for feedback and connection so our students know we care about them and that we see them and hear them. And to respond fully when feedback tells us we are not meeting our student's needs.
- To invite co-directors, co-choreographers, musicians to support and enhance the learning experience for students when we cannot "speak" with the various perspectives other than our own.

- To create new models of performance that include smaller groups for representation. Changing the thinking behind one large production if it doesn't service the needs of our students. This can be fulfilled in the HS with the Spring Festival.