**Medieval Theatre**

Created by Beth Lloyd Lowe

**Unit Objective:**

Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of Medieval Theatre, playwriting, and getting a play up on its feet by participating in discussions, taking a quiz, writing a play, and performing a play.

**Learning Level:**

Intermediate

**Prior Experience:**

All should have some experience with Drama. Ideally they have had a unit on Greek theatre and a unit on Roman theatre before this.

**National Standards:**

TH:Cr2-II.b. Cooperate as a creative team to make interpretive choices for a drama/theatre work.

Re7.1.II.a. Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices.

TH:Re8.1.I.b. Identify and compare cultural perspectives and contexts that may influence the evaluation of a drama/theatre work.

TH:Re9.1.II.c. Verify how a drama/theatre work communicates for a specific purpose and audience.

TH:Cn11.1.I.a. Explore how cultural, global, and historic belief systems affect creative choices in a drama/theatre work.

**Big Idea:**

Theatre is worthwhile and essential to humanity. Playwriting is difficult and the intent of playwrights should be respected.

**Essential Questions:**

How can theatre be perceived as immoral?

Why do we do theatre?

Why should we respect the intent and wishes of a playwright when we perform their play?

How should you start writing a play?

**Enduring Understandings:**

The arts need advocates to survive.

There is something about theatre that keeps it around throughout time.

Playwriting is more than just coming up with a story and writing it in dialogue form.

**Key Knowledge and Skills:**

The Catholic Church banned theatre in the Medieval period and then brought it back in order to teach the people the stories and correct behaviors of the church.

How to write a play that is compelling and realistic.

How to respect a playwright’s wishes when performing their work.

**Authentic Performance Tasks:**

Explanation: Discussions, debate, some of the quiz questions

Interpretation: Debate, putting a play up on its feet, finding the messages in *Everyman*

Application: Writing their own plays, performing their own plays

Perspective: Looking at why they agree and disagree with the Catholic Church’s decision that theatre is immoral, debating both sides of the issue

Empathy: Understanding why the Catholic Church decided to ban theatre, and why they decided to bring it back, having respect for the playwright and performing the play according to their writing and wishes

Self-Understanding: Completing a self-assessment after the final performance, examining their reasons for doing theatre and expressing them to others

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**Day 1: Theatre is banned.**

**Objective:**

Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of why the Catholic Church banned theatre through discussion.

**Hook:**

What do you think of when you hear “Medieval?” (possible answers may include castles, Renaissance Fairs, Medieval Times restaurant, knights, princesses, etc.)

* What about if I say Medieval theatre? Anything?

**Materials Needed:**

Two different colored stacks of sticky notes

**Lecture:**

It isn’t surprising that we don’t think about theatre when we think Medieval. Here’s a little background as to why:

* Roman empire falls. No longer is the majority of the known world ruled by one emperor. The political structure is gone and the only thing left is the Catholic Church.
* Theatre is now gone – the Catholic Church says it’s not okay. Even though I don’t agree with that judgment of theatre, I can’t help but understand why they felt this way that that time – remember what Roman theatre was like? (bloody, violent, basically horrifying) and so that’s what the Catholic Church is not okay.

**Connecting Activity:**

Theatre is immoral – sticky notes of agreeing and disagreeing

* Banning theatre sounds like something we would hate, but if we’re being honest with ourselves, there are some aspects of theatre that could be viewed as immoral.
  + Pass out two different colored sticky notes to each student and tell them to write an argument for theatre being immoral on one color and an argument against theatre being immoral on the other color. When you’re finished, come stick them up on the white board.
    - Give an example: Agree: actors are technically professional liars. Disagree: everyone agrees to be lied to by coming into the theatre
  + Possible answers: Agree
    - Theatre is inherently controversial
    - Emotional recall is dangerous and can be unhealthy
    - Actors are technically professional liars
    - You are on display for an audience
  + Disagree
    - Theatre can also tell stories that help people
    - There are other techniques other than emotional recall that are healthy and can actually help us figure out how to healthily express our emotions
    - Can teach proper behavior
    - Not on display in a gross manner – just like a politician

**Debate:**

Split the class in half and give one half the agrees and one half the disagrees (if the class is larger, you can split into more groups as needed). Tell them to read through the arguments and to put the most convincing arguments together – the strongest arguments. Shoot for around 5 arguments. If you have more than that, choose the best of the best.

* Give the students 10 minutes to read and decide
* After the 10 minutes are up, bring them all back together and have them read out their arguments alternating each time: agree, disagree, agree, disagree, etc.
* After all arguments have been read, allow the groups to give their own follow-up arguments
  + Now, what do you really think?
  + (Most likely, the majority of the students, if not all of the students, will think that theatre is worthwhile and not totally immoral.) The Catholic church eventually agreed with you – they realized theatre can seem immoral, but it can also teach and inspire and be beautiful. So even though they were the ones who got rid of it, they brought it back.
    - Before next time, think about why you think theatre is worthwhile. Why are you here?
* The Catholic church says no to theatre
* THEN, they realize that maybe this is something they can use since mass is in a language the common people don’t understand (Latin) and they don’t have the translated bible yet. So how do we actually tell the people what they should and should not do? Morality plays!
* Also cycle plays that tell stories from the bible

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**Day 2: Arts Advocacy**

**Objective:**

Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of arts advocacy through discussion and creating their own arts advocacy piece.

**Materials Needed:**

Advocacy videos

**Hook:**

In our time, churches aren’t really calling for a ban on theatre in general. However, where theatre and the arts in general are being attacked is in the schools. Some of the strongest voices in favor of arts in the schools are students – aka YOU. So today we’re going to talk about how you can advocate for the arts.

**Advocacy Videos:**

Show the most current arts advocacy videos that you can find on youtube.

* For November 2015 I used:
  + “Arts Advocacy Day 2014 – Fight for the Arts!” – this one is really cool because it shows actual congressmen and congresswomen giving speeches about the arts – both for and against.
  + “Encourage Creativity – Teach the Arts (facts, figures, action)” – this one gives a lot of facts that help advocate for the arts
    - How do these videos advocate for the arts?
    - There are plenty of smart, influential people out there working on the statistics and the facts side of arts advocacy. What unique perspective can you guys bring to the table? (the perspective of students, their own personal journey with theatre, etc.)

**Assessment:**

Write me a theatre philosophy OR create a video OR a collage OR anyway you want to present the following information:

* + Why do I do theatre?
  + What parts/aspects of theatre worry me?
  + What parts/aspects of theatre invigorate me?
  + How can/do I advocate for theatre around those who don’t understand it?
    - Anything not finished in class today is homework. Next time we will present them and you will turn them in.

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**Day 3: Why we do theatre/Morality Plays, Mystery Plays, and Miracle Plays**

**Objective:**

Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of the value of theatre by presenting their advocacy projects and their understanding of Morality/Miracle/Mystery plays by participating in discussion.

**Materials Needed:**

White board and markers, York Mystery Plays trailer

**Hook:**

I’m way excited to see what you came up with for why you do theatre. We’ll start on one side of the room and everyone just briefly show us/tell us about what you chose to do and why you do theatre.

* Discussion: What is the power of theatre and the arts in general? What were the most convincing and helpful stories/explanations? How would we as a class pitch the continuance of the arts in our school to our school board?
* Make sure to turn in your paper/collage/painting/whatever you have
* Grade these out of 20 points based solely on effort – did they answer the question? Did they put effort and thought into the project?

**Lecture: Medieval Theatre**

* Write Mystery, Miracle, and Morality on the board
* These are the three Ms of Medieval theatre
* Mystery plays are nothing like what they sound like. What would you guess they were from the name? (probably something like mystery novels). However, they are actually plays that tell the stories of the bible. And these were dang cool – the Noah story had some serious spectacle. They got barrels of water that held a ton of water, carried them up above the wagon, and rigged them so that when the flood came they actually had water that poured down for like 15 minutes and went into a special trough that flooded around Noah’s ark, but not inside of Noah’s ark.
  + These are still being performed and now they are done even more spectacularly: show youtube trailer “York Mystery Plays 2012 – Cinematic Trailer”
    - Would you go watch these? Why or why not? Why do you think the common folk of the Medieval era went to see these?
    - Why were they necessary? Well, at this time Catholic mass was all in Latin, the common folk couldn’t read Latin, or couldn’t read at all. They didn’t have Bibles in their houses and they didn’t understand mass on Sunday, so they didn’t know the stories of the Bible or really anything about their church or what they should be doing to be good Catholics. They needed plays in the vernacular to understand.
* Miracle plays depicted the stories and lives of the saints. Who are saints in the Catholic religion? (someone who did a lot of good deeds in their life, then they usually died for their beliefs, and you can pray to them to help you). These are my favorite because most saints met a really gruesome, violent death, and so they used a lot of special effects to show one get burned at the stake or crucified or stoned to death, even though they just banned theatre because of all of the gruesome and violent deaths that were depicted onstage…
* Morality plays are the easiest to guess – what do you think a morality play might be about? They are plays that teach you how to be a good Catholic with good morals. They are incredibly didactic (hit-you-over-the-head preachy). The play we will be reading is one of these and is called Everyman.
* Come prepared next time with a way to read – with a British accent, dropping every t, with a lisp, etc.

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**Day 4: Read Everyman**

**Objective:**

Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of Morality plays by reading *Everyman* and discussing it.

**Materials Needed:**

copies of *Everyman*, small slips of paper

**Hook:**

Pass out two small pieces of paper to each student.

* Tell them to write down a way to read on their papers
* Come prepared with your own:
  + Speak every line as if you were frustrated
  + Sean Connery (basically every S is now an SH)
  + British accent
  + Add “Okay?” to the end of every line
  + Mispronounce at least one word in every line
* Put all of the slips together in a pile (or in a hat/bowl)

**Read Everyman**

* Ask for volunteers for all of the roles in *Everyman*.
* Start reading the play – before each character speaks for the first time, have them take a slip of paper and read their lines in that manner. When Everyman gets bored of his, he can change to a new one every so often.
* After each new character has left, discuss the plot. What are we learning about how to be a good Catholic here?

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**Day 5: Playwriting**

**Objective:**

Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of good playwriting by starting to write their own plays.

**Materials Needed:**

Playwriting powerpoint in downloads – the information in this powerpoint is included under the Playwriting Activity Header, paper and pencils for each student

**Hook:**

Ask: What did you think of the writing in *Everyman*? Was it good, bad, okay, etc.? Do we have anything like Morality Plays today?

**Playwriting Activity:**

Because Morality Plays were not exactly written to our modern standard (our audiences don’t like being hit over the head with how they should act), now is the perfect time to talk about playwriting.

* Get out a notebook or a few pieces of paper and a pencil or pen.
* While the students get those items out, set up the projector with the powerpoint. Start on the slide that says Rule #1 (slide 6).
* We are going to write our own plays, but we need a few rules to help us avoid beginner’s mistakes.
  + Rule #1: You only get 2 characters. No more, no less.
    - Give them a name and a goal – and the goals must endanger each other’s goals (pause to give them time – give an example: Mary and George. Mary wants to go out on a date with George, George wants Mary to go away. If one of them achieves their goal, the other cannot.)
  + Rule #2: You only get one scene.
    - Pick the location of your play now. (classroom, subway, gym, home, etc.)
  + Rule #3: You do not get to plan.
    - Let go of your ideas about plot. Let your characters be alive and take control with you as the messenger. Discover the characters through their lines and behavior – do not let your own intentions smother their natures.
  + Rule #4: You cannot exit or end.
    - You and your characters are in this together. If a character exits, the other remains to soliloquize on the stage alone. If they both die, they continue to speak as spirits or ghosts. Write as much as you can in the time given. There is no length requirement.
  + Rule #5: You must carefully craft your dialogue
    - Drop hints and clues to character goals through subtext, vary the length of lines throughout, reveal information bit by bit and do not repeat information.
    - Give one of the characters a line now. Insert the central conflict in that first line, but use subtext (example: Mary’s first line could be: “Cold day, huh?”)
    - Give your second character a response (example: George: “Yeah.”)
    - Write more if you have time.
      * Give the students the rest of the class period to write their plays, but bring them back together 10 minutes before the end of class

**Wrap-up:**

How are your plays coming? What do you think of these rules? Are you frustrated by them, or do they provide a useful structure for creativity? What did you learn about playwriting today that you wish the writers of Morality Plays had known?

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**Day 6: Finishing Plays, Beginning Project**

**Objective:**

Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of what makes a good play by revising their scripts and beginning work on putting some of them up on their feet.

**Materials Needed:**

Their scripts from last time, the playwriting powerpoint, and pencils and paper for each student

**Hook:**

Write the following quote on the board as the students walk in: “One usually dislikes a play while writing it, but afterward it grows on one. Let others judge and make decisions.” Anton Chekhov, from a letter to Maxim Gorky, September 24, 1900.

* Discussion: From your short experience with playwriting in this class and your other experiences with playwriting before this, do you agree? Since Chekhov is one of the most famous playwrights of all time, let’s take his advice for now.

**Group Readings**:

Have the students get out their plays from last time and pencils or pens. While they do this, set up the powerpoint again to the slide that says: “Cast and Produce”

* Read Aloud Often.
* Cast it and do it now.
* Does it sound right?
* Get feedback.
  + Group the students in groups of 3 and have them one by one give their scripts to the other two to read out loud.
  + Tell them not to worry if they feel like theirs is the worst play ever written – just tell them you were going for a Morality Play, and then as you hear it read aloud, fix it!
    - Give the students 15 minutes to read each other’s plays and make comments.

**Revising, Rewriting, and Continuing:**

Now that you’ve heard it aloud, what did you think?

* Now take 10 minutes to revise what you have written, rewrite your lines, or continue writing your play once you are happy with what you have so far.
* After 10 minutes are up, bring the students back together.
* Has your writing changed now that you’ve heard it spoken aloud?

**Start Project:**

* Plays are meant to be performed, not just read, so let’s perform some of these plays!
* If you are interested in having your play performed, stand in this area of the room. If you are interested in acting in one of the plays, stand in this area of the room. (The students I had were also really interested in directing and had a little bit of experience with it, so they requested a third group be made of directors. This is not necessary, but if the students are interested, go for it! If there is not the correct number of students, leftovers can also be used as directors)
* Count the number of students wanting to have their plays performed and the number wanting to be actors. Work it out so that there are two actors for every playwright (and one director for every playwright if you are using directors). Ask kids to shuffle around if they are willing until you have the correct numbers
* Ask the playwrights what gendered actors they need and make sure that lines up as well. If it does not, ask who can change the genders in their scenes without changing the meaning of the play. Then assign actors to playwrights (and directors to playwrights).

**Unit Final Assessment:**

* Now that you have your groups, you will be working together to get this play up on its feet.
* What is the role of the playwright now that there are actors involved? Do they suddenly cease to exist or care about the play? Nope. You may now end your play, and you should be constantly watching and listening and adding lines in here and changing this line and playing around with the script.
* Actors – your job is to act. And to memorize even though the lines may be changing around.
* (Directors – what is your job? You should be helping the actors create the world the playwright desires – help them with blocking, emotion, objectives, characterization, etc.)
  + You have the rest of the time this time and the entire period next time to work on these.

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**Day 7: Rehearsal**

**Objective:**

Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of playwriting and how to get a play on its feet from the page by rehearsing and revising their scenes.

**Materials Needed:**

Scripts from last time, access to the prop and costume closet.

**Hook:**

Write the following quote on the board: “Do you know what a playwright is? A playwright is someone who feels his guts hang out on the stage.” - Edward Albee

* What do you think Edward Albee means by this quote? Do you agree? If this is true, how should actors and directors treat plays they are given to produce? It is incredibly important to figure out what the playwright was saying with their play and portray exactly that. It was easy in Morality plays – they outright say over and over again what they want you to get out of it. Now it’s harder, but you still have to find the “moral.”

**Rehearsal:**

You have the rest of the class period today to rehearse. Make sure you have all of the props or costume pieces that you need – come see me if you need something from our stock.

* Walk around to each group and make sure they are on task, answer any questions, and give advice.

**Wrap-up:**

Remember we are performing next time! Be sure to be memorized, and bring anything you need.

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**Day 8: Performance and Assessment**

**Objective:**

Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of playwriting and getting a play up on its feet as well as finding the moral of the play by performing each other’s scripts.

**Materials Needed:**

Access to the prop/costume closet, rubrics for grading playwrights and actors (and directors).

**Hook:**

We are performing today! Take 10 minutes to make sure you are ready and have all of your props, costumes, etc.

**Performances:**

Number the board with the number of groups you have – 1-5 if you have 5 groups, 1-10 if you have 10 groups, etc. and when their rehearsal time is up, announce that the playwright should come sign their group up for a performance slot on the board.

* Perform in the order listed on the board.
* After each performance, ask the audience for their reactions to this play. What was the message/moral?
* Grade playwrights and actors separately according to the attached rubrics

**Self-Assessment:**

After the performances are through, ask the students to get out a piece of paper and assess their group in writing. What went well in the final performance? What went wrong? How well did the group work together to portray the play’s message? How could the group have worked better? How did I contribute to this scene? How could I have contributed more to this scene?

* Collect these assessments and use them to help with grading the scenes. Give each student who turns in a thoughtful self assessment 10 points.

**Quiz:**

Give the students time to study for a short quiz at the end of the period. Tell them to study their notes on Medieval theatre.

* Quiz: 1. What is a Morality play? (a play that teaches the audience how to live their lives and how to be a good Catholic)
* 2. Which Medieval play category would a play about Adam and Eve fit into? (Mystery)
* 3. Which Medieval play category tells the stories of the Saints? (Miracle)
* 4. Why did the Catholic Church ban the theatre? (because they believed it to be immoral – especially all of the violence shown onstage)
* 5. Why did the Catholic Church bring theatre back? (because they recognized that theatre is an effective teaching tool, and because the common Catholics had no idea what they were supposed to do or not do and plays were a simple fix)
  + Collect these and grade them out of 5 – 1 point per question.

Medieval Theatre Playwright Evaluation

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Score: /10

Does the play contain exactly two characters? 2 points

Comments:

Do the characters have conflicting goals? 2 points

Comments:

Is the dialogue carefully crafted with subtext and variation? 6 points

Comments:

Medieval Theatre Actor Evaluation

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Score: /10

Is the actor portraying their character’s goal effectively? 2 points

Comments:

Is the actor using the subtext provided by the playwright to help tell the story? 2 points

Comments:

Is the actor working to portray the message the playwright intended? 6 points

Comments: