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December, 1939. Chicago. The play takes place in a moment in Bigger Thomas’s mind, right before he is cornered by police. Bigger strings together memories of his crime, the day leading up to it, fantasies, and moments from his childhood. At first, Bigger is alone and surrounded by a crowd of people. His double, The Black Rat, explains that everyone has two selves: the self that other people see, and the self that they themselves see.

Flashback to the night before. Bigger helps Mary, a young white socialite, to her room after she’s been drinking. They are kissing on her bed when her blind mother Mrs. Dalton comes in looking for her. To quiet Mary, Bigger puts a pillow over her face. When Mrs. Dalton leaves, Bigger realizes he’s suffocated her. Bigger starts to run and breaks a mirror. In the broken mirror he sees The Black Rat.

The morning before, Bigger kills a black rat with a frying pan for his mother Hannah and his sister Vera. He goes to the movies with his brother Buddy and talks about how the white men own the world, and he wants something better than to be a chauffeur for the Daltons, a job he is interviewing for later that day.

At his job interview, Bigger meets Mary and Mrs. Dalton. Flashback to earlier that day, Bigger tries to get Buddy to rob a deli with him. Mrs. Dalton tells Bigger she’s hiring him for the chauffeuring job. She tells him to drive Mary to the university that evening.

Bigger and Buddy go to meet their friend Gus, who’s supposed to help them rob the deli. The play flashes forward to Mary and Bigger in the car. Mary tells him she actually wants to go somewhere else, but that he shouldn’t tell her parents. Earlier, Gus is late. Buddy accuses Bigger of being scared, and the two fight. Later, Mary’s boyfriend Jan joins Bigger and Mary in the car. He tells Bigger he’s a communist, which means they’re comrades. Jan makes Bigger move over while he takes the wheel. Mary and Jan offer Bigger some of their alcohol. Mary says she’s leaving for Detroit in the morning. Bigger drinks.

The play flashes forward to the moment after Bigger kills Mary. He and The Black Rat debate what to do. They decide to blame the crime on Jan. Flashback to the car with Jan and Mary. Jan pushes communist pamphlets on Bigger, saying they are fighting for black people.

The next morning, Mrs. Dalton tells Bigger that Mary never arrived in Detroit. She asks Bigger about the night before, and Bigger frames Jan. Later still, Bigger talks to Mr. Britten, a private detective.

Bessie, Bigger’s girlfriend, tells him she saw him with Jan and Mary the night before. She accuses Bigger of not loving her anymore and of kissing Mary. Earlier, Mr. Britten accuses Bigger of being a communist and finds Jan’s pamphlets in Bigger’s pocket. The night before, Bigger tries to figure out what to do with Mary’s body. The next day, Bessie gives Bigger the idea of ransom.

Bigger writes a ransom note to the Daltons. Later, Mr. Britten tells the papers that the Daltons will comply with the demands. The night of the crime, Bigger pushes Mary’s body into the furnace. Later, Mr. Britten and Mrs. Dalton tell Bigger to clear the ashes from the furnace. Mr. Britten finds a bone in the ashes. Bigger jumps out the window.

Bigger finds Bessie and tells her that it’s time to run. Bigger and Bessie hide in an abandoned building. After Bessie falls asleep, Bigger realizes he can’t take her with him, and he can’t leave her behind. He kills her with a brick and puts her body down an airshaft. Only after he’s done it does he realize that all his money was in her pocket.

Bigger runs through the snowy Chicago night, trying to find food. He hears a black family blaming him for causing mob violence. Bigger flashes back to the day his father was killed in a riot and hears all the white men of the play telling him to keep his eyes down on the dirt. Back in the present moment, Bigger uses his last two cents to buy a newspaper. It has his face on the front page.

Bigger imagines the courtroom. The Black Rat takes on all the voices of the play, telling the court what Bigger did. He shows Bessie’s body. He shows Mary’s bones. The cracked mirror appears, and Bigger faces The Black Rat. He realizes that by killing Mary he had broken away from society making him free for the first time in his life.

Then we return to the first image of the play: Bigger is on a rooftop surrounded by police. The police grab him and prepare to drop him through a trap door. As the door opens, Bigger drops. He flies.

**QUESTION**

The synopsis above describes the events as you’ll encounter them at the theatre. Can you put together a timeline that puts the events in Bigger’s life in chronological order—in the order that they happen in Wright’s novel? What does Nambi E. Kelley’s reordering do to your experience of Bigger’s story?
In the opening scene of Richard Wright’s novel, the protagonist Bigger Thomas kills a foot-long, yellow-toothed rat that’s infested the one-room apartment Bigger shares with his family. Bigger puts a wooden box in front of a hole in the molding, blocking the rat’s only means of escape, before hurling a heavy iron skillet at the vermin. This forceful opening offers a vivid portrait of the black rat, which serves as a double for Bigger himself: made monstrous by squalid circumstances, trapped, overcome by fear, and undone by violence. When Bigger crushes the rat’s lifeless skull under his shoe, he anticipates his own destruction.

In her stage adaptation, Nambi E. Kelley takes this key symbol one step further by casting The Black Rat as a character who shadows Bigger throughout the play. Like a voice inside his head, The Black Rat pushes and prods Bigger’s anxieties, offers untrustworthy advice, and becomes a physical manifestation of Bigger’s double consciousness—a term coined by the great thinker and Civil Rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois in his 1903 essay collection, *The Souls of Black Folk*:

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings.”

The figure of The Black Rat shows Bigger as he sees himself, through the eyes of an oppressive white society. By doubling Bigger’s consciousness, the playwright stages Bigger’s struggle to achieve the hope Du Bois holds for every black American “to merge [their] double self.”

—MOLLY FITZMAURICE
BIGGER’S INTERNAL WORLD ONSTAGE:
An Interview with Director Seret Scott

Published in 1940, Richard Wright’s novel Native Son explores the African American experience prior to the Civil Rights movement. In 2012, the Library of Congress hailed it as one of the “100 Books that Shaped America.” Now playwright Nambi E. Kelley has adapted the novel into a vibrant play, which had its world premiere at Chicago’s Court Theatre and a second production in California at the Marin Theatre Company. Both of these productions were directed by Seret Scott, who returns to Yale Rep to lead a new production. Scott sat down with Yale Rep Artistic Coordinator Jocelyn Prince to talk about the innovative structure of Kelley’s adaptation, how it relates to the protagonist Bigger’s journey, and how Bigger’s struggle relates to our American society today.

JOCELYN PRINCE: What does Nambi’s adaptation of Wright’s novel Native Son say about race, racism, and black life in inner cities like Chicago before the Civil Rights movement? How does it resonate today?

SERET SCOTT: Wright’s novel is set in 1930s Chicago, and Nambi’s adaptation for the stage makes no attempt to update or modernize the story. What about the plight of the main character Bigger, a 20-something African American man, has changed today? Financial and educational poverty still, disturbingly, claim far too many young black men in communities like Chicago’s South Side. He’s not recognized; his community is not recognized; and we, the social order, are implicated in that. When a young man like Bigger walks in a room, how often does society say to him, implicitly and explicitly, “Leave yourself, your thoughts, your ideas outside, and be only what you represent to me.”

JP: What attracted you to this theatrical version of Native Son as a director, in terms of style and structure?

SS: The adaptation is stunning. Wright’s novel is a large, thick classic that Nambi has honed to its essence in intent, substance, and sheer poetry. The adaptation is very visual; it sweeps you up in its 64 scenes. You drop into a moment...it’s gone...and you have only what you need for the next moment. Nambi also introduces a character that’s not in the book, but comes from one of its iconic images—The Black Rat. In the novel, Bigger uses an iron skillet to violently kill a black rat scurrying around the small apartment he shares with his family. She has expanded that image and created the character of The Black Rat to give the audience a glimpse into Bigger’s choices and his decisions, both good and bad.

JP: What is Bigger’s story really about to you?

SS: Fate versus free will. Bigger is a very poorly educated young man. We’re looking at someone with few options, someone whose fate was determined at birth. We watch him make choices that demonstrate a complete lack of structure, guidance, or free will. The famous African American writer W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about double consciousness, and this theory is what we see with The Black Rat and Bigger. The Black Rat represents the part of Bigger that Bigger wants to be.

SERET SCOTT recently directed the world premiere of Native Son at Chicago’s Court Theatre and the subsequent production at Marin Theatre Company. At Yale Rep she previously directed Crumbs from the Table of Joy by Lynn Nottage. She is an Associate Artist at The Old Globe. She has directed productions Off-Broadway at Second Stage Theatre and New Victory Theatre; and at regional theatres including American Conservatory Theater, South Coast Repertory, Long Wharf Theatre, Hartford Stage, Arena Stage, Woolley Mammoth, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Denver Theatre Center, and Philadelphia Theatre Company, among many others.

continued on next page
An Interview with Director Seret Scott

**JP:** In the play, the scenes and characters rapidly swirl around Bigger, and he sees fragments of himself through the eyes of the other characters. How does the structure of the play illustrate Bigger’s journey?

**SS:** The characters appear and disappear as they propel Bigger’s story in quick time shifts. In his life, Bigger never had a chance to know anyone in a substantive way, nor does anyone really know him. He is not given the agency to say, “I have these thoughts; I want to do these things.” On the first page of the script, Nambi lists the time period as “a split second inside Bigger’s mind.” The whole play takes place in a second. The first and the last moments of the play are separated by a single second in his mind and memory.

**JP:** The adaptation cuts out the third part of Wright’s novel which depicts Bigger’s time in prison and his trial and conviction. What is lost or gained in this cut?

**SS:** The last part of the book is about saving Bigger. The first two parts of the book are about the Bigger we meet on the street, a young man physically trying to figure things out. We, in the audience, want to change Bigger’s circumstances and choices from the very beginning. We think that maybe Bigger and The Black Rat together can turn the story around and make everything turn out okay. However, we see that society has created Bigger’s circumstances, and he can’t change them no matter the choices he makes.

**JP:** Wright’s _Native Son_ routinely appears on high school reading lists. How and why is this book and Kelley’s theatrical adaptation important for high school students?

**SS:** Young people see Bigger through their own eyes. The story is almost 80 years old but still addresses some of the decisions young people without guidance are making today. Bigger and his friends are contemporary characters.

Costume sketches by Katie Touart for the Yale Rep production of _Native Son_.

The Black Rat

Bigger

Bessie

Hannah

Buddy

Vera

Mrs. Dalton

Jan

Mary

Britten
Scenes from Childhood
Richard Nathaniel Wright (September 4, 1908–November 28, 1960) was born on a plantation in the southwest of Mississippi, the son of a sharecropper and a schoolteacher. When Wright was four or five, his family went to live with his maternal grandparents. His autobiography *Black Boy* (1945) begins there, with an account of how, one day, he had played with matches under the curtains and set fire to the house. Nobody perished in the blaze, but “more than half the house [was] destroyed.” He was lashed for starting the fire and started to have nightmares of “huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows,” which threatened to drown him. In this recurring fever dream, whiteness posed an overwhelming threat to his life.

Soon thereafter, the Wrights moved to Memphis, where Wright’s father found work as a porter on the night shift. Not long after that, Wright’s father deserted their family for another woman, leaving him, his little brother, and his mother in acute precarity, lacking stability and security. “My mother’s suffering grew into a symbol in my mind,” he writes, “gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering.”

Hungry for Words
Throughout his childhood and adolescence, Wright took a keen interest in words and stories, which gave him both an escape from reality and a means for understanding reality. “Whenever my environment had failed to support or nourish me, I had clutched at books,” Wright said. Though his schooling was sometimes erratic, his mother taught him to read. He delivered newspapers, which he read on the job, acquiring knowledge of the wider world—but also earning a meager income to stave off the “biting hunger.” He was valedictorian of his junior high school class and published a serialized short story, “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre,” in the *Southern Register*, the “local Negro newspaper,” in 1924. He dropped out of high school but read avidly, even borrowing a white co-worker’s library card. “Reading grew into a passion,” he writes. “I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel; I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted and passed to keep out of my consciousness; I was acting on impulses that southern senators in the nation’s capital had striven to keep out of Negro life; I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo.”

Black Marxist
In 1927, Wright caught a Jim Crow coach—a segregated train car—to the South Side of Chicago. He writes, “I was not leaving the South to forget the South, but so that some day I might understand it.” He consumed readings in sociology and economics, coming to see the condition of black Americans as intimately connected to issues of class. In the 1930s, Wright became a member of the American Communist Party, though his membership lasted only a decade. Wright saw similarities between the plight of the worker, as described by the philosopher Karl Marx, and the black individual, both of whom were excluded from opportunities within the American capitalist system.

However, Wright felt that socialist ideologies tended to be too abstract, too far removed from real life. As such, Wright decided to use the novel form to describe the actual, lived experiences of the black working class in visceral, palpable detail. “One of the great tasks of Negro writers of the future will be to show the Negro to himself,” he says, drawing from the literary and cultural heritages of both blacks and whites. In this task, perspective was key. For Wright, perspective meant awareness of the world and consciousness of one’s times: “It means that Negro writers...
Richard Wright and *Native Son*

must learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York’s Harlem or Chicago’s South Side with the consciousness that one sixth of the earth’s surface belongs to the working class. It means that Negro writers must create in their readers’ minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs on Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil.”

*Native Son*

Wright brought perspective to his writing. Images that stayed with him from his time growing up in the South undergird his novel *Native Son* (1940), which follows the story of Bigger Thomas, a nineteen-year-old black American who is convicted of the rape and murder of a young white woman. In *Native Son*, Wright paints a bold and uncompromising portrait of the civilization that gave birth to Bigger. In the essay "How Bigger Was Born," Wright says, “The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect.” Wright is firm that these swaggering, rebellious Bigger Thomases—“who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South” and, consequentially, "were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken”—were products of their environment, the South, where, Wright says, "The white neighbor decided to limit the amount of education his black neighbor could receive; decided to keep him off the police force and out of the local national guards; to segregate him residentially; to Jim Crow him in public places; to restrict his participation in the professions and jobs; and to build up a vast, dense ideology of racial superiority that would justify any act of violence taken against him to defend white dominance; and further, to condition him to hope for little and to receive that little without rebelling.”

*Notes on Native Son*

Of course, *Native Son* has not been without criticism. Wright set out to write a novel that no one could “read and weep over and feel good about,” a novel that was “so hard and deep that [its readers] would have to face it without the consolation of tears.” Wright wanted to make people uncomfortable. He didn’t want to give them a fairytale, or even an Oscar-worthy drama. He wanted them to see his version of reality—an ugly version of reality—as if under a microscope. He wanted people to change.

In his book *Notes from a Native Son*, writer James Baldwin accuses Wright’s novel of sentimentality, “the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion.” Baldwin claims that Wright does the very thing Wright was trying to avoid: dramatically appealing to readers’ feelings and sympathies. Baldwin thinks *Native Son* is false because, instead of offering a complex portrait of Bigger and black people, it simply makes Bigger out to be a symbol, a stereotype, a monster of American creation, whose entire existence is based on the hatred of blackness. Wright doesn’t tell readers much about the people in Bigger’s community, least of all the ways in which they love and support one another. Instead, Wright isolates Bigger from these collective experiences of black joy and solidarity. The novel focuses solely on Bigger’s bitterness, rage, and loathing, which unfortunately reinforces images of angry black men. According to Baldwin, “This is the significance of *Native Son* and also, unhappily, its overwhelming limitation.”

Moreover, author and activist bell hooks holds *Native Son* accountable for the ways in which it does violence to black women. For her, *Native Son* shows how black men, who live in a white supremacist society and “feel that they are living on borrowed time, just waiting to be locked down (imprisoned) or taken out (murdered),” in turn physically or psychologically abuse black women, over whom they think they can exercise some degree of power. Bigger continuously treats Bessie as if she is expendable, as if she doesn’t matter, mirroring the ways in which society also forgot about Bessie. Bigger was only punished for the white woman’s death. The black woman’s death was a side note.

Even with these criticisms, and perhaps even because of these criticisms and debates, it is without a doubt that the novel solidified Wright’s place in the histories of black Marxism, black nationalism, and the American literary canon. In 1963, Jewish intellectual Irving Howe wrote that “The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright’s novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.”

*Leaving America*

Wright moved to France permanently in 1947 and spent much of the last decade of his life in Paris, where he felt he had respite from the intolerable racism of America. He never returned to the States. Instead, he traveled extensively in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

He died in 1960 in Paris. He was cremated with a copy of *Black Boy* (1945), his autobiography, at the famous Père Lachaise Cemetery. Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library holds the largest collection of Wright’s papers.

—ASHLEY CHANG
VERSIONS OF NATIVE SON: Adapting the Novel for Stage and Film

In an adaptation, an artist takes a work of art that exists in one form and adapts it for another form. Quentin Tarantino’s film *Jackie Brown* is an adaptation of Elmore Leonard’s novel *Rum Punch*. The Netflix show *Orange is the New Black* is based on Piper Kerman’s memoir of her year in a women’s prison. The movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* is an adaptation of the 1967 ride at Disneyland.

Sometimes, an adaptation closely resembles the original, which is often the case for film adaptations of superhero comics. But even when the original and the adaptation appear to be extremely similar, the adaptation process is never a simple task of copying. The adaptor must ask a number of open-ended questions:

- **Why did the original artist choose a particular form in order to communicate their story or message?**

- **Would the story or message mean something different in a new form?**

- **Which elements of the original artwork should be kept, altered, or left behind?**

Richard Wright’s 1940 novel *Native Son* broke new ground when it was published. Choosing the novel form because of its ability to articulate the inner lives of people, Wright granted white America access to the mind of a young black man, in the hope that such a confrontation between Bigger and the reader would shed light on the nation’s racist structure. Wright tells Bigger’s story with great sympathy and richness of detail. He presents Bigger’s psychology—the psychology of a man driven to, and capable of, murder—a psychology that many people find troubling—with spellbinding clarity. For these reasons, and also because of the novel’s great impact in the cultural fabric of America, successive generations of artists have sought to adapt it into different forms. These artists have shown that *Native Son* remains relevant, though it was written almost 80 years ago.

continued on next page
1938 | Wright published his first collection of novellas, *Uncle Tom’s Children*. Dissatisfied with its reviews, he vowed *Native Son* would be “so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.”

1939 | The popular Book-of-the-Month Club offered to promote *Native Son*, on the conditions that Wright cut the novel’s most sexually explicit details, especially the young white woman Mary Dalton’s shocking lust for Bigger, and allow a new introduction he never got the chance to read. Written by an influential white woman, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, the preface reframed the novel as an almost-scientific report and harkened back to white abolitionists “authenticating” slave narratives for publication.

1940 | As the March Book-of-the-Month, *Native Son* catapulted to unprecedented fame for a black author, selling an astronomical 215,000 copies within three weeks.

Reviewers almost universally praised *Native Son* for its narration, dramatic story, and strident message against racism. White critics in particular applauded the character Bigger as psychologically complex and “authentic.” Some dissenting critics, especially in black bourgeois circles, worried the book risked confirming racist stereotypes.

Libraries almost immediately began banning the book, starting with ones in Birmingham, Alabama.

1949 | James Baldwin, who had once considered Wright a mentor and friend, harshly ridiculed *Native Son* in his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” He compared the novel to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; while, the simple, servile Uncle Tom pacified and Bigger provoked, both courted the same white readers and suffered the same limitations of political protest novels.

1951 | Baldwin criticized the novel again in his *Notes from a Native Son* in his essay “Many Thousands Gone,” calling out *Native Son*’s racial caricatures as “the incarnation of a myth” and “that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro.”

1952 | *Native Son*’s first French translation struck a chord with Martinique-born intellectual Frantz Fanon, who saw striking similarities between Bigger’s America and the collapsing European colonies. *Native Son* informed Fanon’s belief that cruel psychological and social realities, and the violence they provoke, transcended national borders. In his influential *Black Skin, White Mask*, Fanon wrote that *Native Son* “is undoubtedly a political best-seller.”

In 1986, *Native Son* was again adapted into a film, this time by African American playwright and screenwriter Richard Wesley. The cast featured Victor Love as Bigger, Elizabeth McGovern as Mary, Geraldine Page as Peggy, Oprah Winfrey as Mrs. Thomas, Akosua Busia as Bessie, Carroll Baker as Mrs. Dalton, and Matt Dillon as Jan. Movie critic Roger Ebert wrote that “the movie understands that the story really is about the killer’s point of view. It is not the story of a crime, not a docudrama, not a sociological essay; it is the story of how someone can do a dreadful thing, and not be completely responsible for it.” In this sense, the movie remains faithful to Wright’s intention. However, another critic said that Wright would have been infuriated by the adaptation, because the
filmmakers “appear to have been aiming at the same genteel audience that insists on seeing something sentimental and upbeat,” which is exactly what Wright wanted to avoid.

Nambi E. Kelley’s new stage adaptation of *Native Son* seems to make a big departure from the original. It tells Bigger’s story out of order, in dreamlike fragments of memory that rely on metaphor and theatrical illusion. According to Wright’s daughter Julia and grandson Malcolm, Kelley’s adaptation “is probably the most multi-faceted version…. Nambi Kelley is wonderfully apt at ‘playing’ with space, time and circumstance.

We feel Richard Wright would be captivated by the creation of The Black Rat as Bigger’s alter ego.” Though this adaptation shifts the way the narrative unfolds, it expresses the essence of the original: the stormy, swirling feel of Bigger’s reality.

Kelley’s adaptation certainly won’t be the last attempt to adapt this important novel. Bow and Arrow Entertainment has planned a new film adaptation, directed by artist Rashid Johnson and written by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks.

—ASHLEY CHANG

**QUESTIONS**

Readers and viewers have different expectations when they encounter stories in different genres. Novels, for instance, are a great form for expressing people’s inner lives. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* focuses mainly on Bigger’s thoughts and feelings.

What are some ways that a play or a film could capture these private experiences? How do you translate emotion from words to images? How would a stage adaptation have to differ from a film adaptation? What can you do onstage that you can’t do onscreen, and vice versa?

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1963 | Irving Howe defended *Native Son* from Baldwin’s attacks, in his rebuttal “Black Boys and Native Sons.” For the Marxist Howe, the political potential of *Native Son* far outweighed any of Baldwin’s criticisms. “How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried?”

1991 | The Library of America published a new edition of *Native Son* in its entirety—with the 1939 cuts restored.

1981 | Challenged in North Adams, Massachusetts, due to “violence, sex, and profanity.”

1994 | Retained in the Yakima, Washington, schools after a five-month battle for its place on high school reading lists.

1996 | Challenged at Northwest High School in High Point, North Carolina, as “sexually graphic and violent.”

1998 | Removed from Irvington High School in Fremont, California, after parents’ complaints and challenged at Hamilton High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

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book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explored how stereotypes shape the black sense of self: “He is afraid, but of what is he afraid? Of himself,” concluded the prominent psychiatrist and thinker.

1955 | Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man* and Wright’s protégé, emphasized the difficulty and importance of escaping *Native Son*’s legacy as the definitive African American novel, explaining: if “the Negro, or any other writer, is going to do what is expected of him, he’s lost the battle.” He continued to struggle with the work for decades, concerned that Wright flattened his characters in the name of politics.

1960s 1970s 1990s

1978 | Challenged in Goffstown, New Hampshire, and Elwood Park, New Jersey, due to “objectionable” language.

1988 | Challenged at the Berrian Springs, Michigan, High School for being “vulgar, profane, and sexually explicit.”

Black feminists—such as Sherley Anne Williams and Barbara Smith—objected to *Native Son* for its excessive violence against women, including rape, murder, and dismemberment. They also argued that as an author, Wright excluded strong women, instead depicting passive, one-dimensional, unintelligent, and secondary female characters.

1991 | The Library of America published a new edition of *Native Son* in its entirety—with the 1939 cuts restored.

**Native Son** continued to be one of the most frequently banned or challenged books in public schools and libraries, even in recent years:

—MOLLY FITZMAURICE
The story of Chicago race relations, both past and present, might be best understood by examining maps. Between 1916 and 1930, almost 1.6 million blacks left the South, escaping the region’s brazen racism: lynchings, Jim Crow laws, segregation, and lack of economic opportunity for African Americans. In what’s known as the Great Migration, black folk flocked to northern industrial centers such as Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, New York, and Chicago. Scholar and activist Timuel Black says of his own family’s migration from Alabama to Chicago in 1919 that “[his family] came for three principal reasons: To be able to fight back if they were attacked, to be able to vote, and to be able to have a better education for their children.”

Both Richard Wright (the author of the novel Native Son) and Bigger Thomas (Native Son’s main character) moved with their families from the South to Chicago during the Great Migration.

But Chicago did not turn out to be the escape that many migrants imagined. New black residents found new forms of racism and inequality. Although Illinois banned racial segregation in the late 19th century, local and federal housing laws banned or strongly disincentivized racial integration in Chicago neighborhoods. Beginning in 1934, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) offered mortgage insurance to banks and other loan-giving institutions. This created a security blanket for potential homeowners, lowered the potential risk for banks, and resulted in lower interest rates for those approved. With this insurance, homebuyers could purchase a home in the Chicago suburbs for $5,000 (~$93,000 today) with monthly payments of around $30 (~$550 today).

The FHA, however, argued that the presence of racial minorities in neighborhoods drove property values down. Local appraisers created a property rating system that determined who could get an FHA-insured loan. As Beryl Satter writes, “they ranked properties, blocks, and even whole neighborhoods according to a descending scheme of A (Green), B (Blue), C (Yellow), and D (Red). ‘A’ ratings went to properties located in ‘homogeneous’ areas—ones that (in one appraiser’s words) lacked even ‘a single foreigner or Negro.’” Minorities and immigrants were disqualified from FHA-insured loans under this rating system. The system made it much easier for residents of Green and Blue areas in the Chicago suburbs to receive financial resources. People in Red areas were almost never eligible for resources to buy or improve homes.

To ensure the homogeneity of Blue and Green neighborhoods, local housing authorities instituted restrictive housing covenants in predominantly or totally white neighborhoods dictating that homeowners could not sell or rent to minority families. Bolstered by national

Chicago's Southside Black Belt. April, 1941. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
law, Chicago’s housing covenants served as a legal barrier for minorities wishing to move into more affluent areas of the city. These legal barriers, coupled with white-gang violence toward minorities who moved out of redlined neighborhoods, created de facto segregation in Chicago.

Most of Chicago’s black residents lived in the Black Belt of the South Side. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, this string of neighborhoods spanned about thirty blocks and housed roughly 78% of Chicago’s black population (over 200,000 during that time). Since lending agencies were loath to give loans to racial minorities (or anyone living near racial minorities), real estate companies bought large swaths of buildings in the Black Belt and other redlined neighborhoods.

Since housing laws made it difficult for minorities to move elsewhere, these companies would split one-family homes that used to be inhabited by white families into multi-family ‘kitchenettes’ and increase the rent exponentially. Four, five, and sometimes six families would live on one floor and share one bathroom. Chicago’s landlords in the 1930s had zero incentive to fix or clean anything on their properties, leading to the creation of the squalid conditions that Bigger and his family endure in Native Son.

Chicago’s geographical landscape at this time helps shape Bigger’s psychological turmoil in Native Son. Trapped in an overcrowded and blighted neighborhood, Bigger is constantly reminded of both his geographic and social limitations. Although his family made it to the North, Bigger’s aspirations remain confined to a sliver of the city.

—TAYLOR BARFIELD
WHY DID RICHARD WRIGHT "TRY TO BE A COMMUNIST"?

“What on earth of importance could transpire in so dingy a place?” wondered Richard Wright in July 1933, when a co-worker led him up a dark stairway to his first meeting of the John Reed Club, an organization that supported leftist and Marxist writers. That night, Wright stayed up until dawn reading pamphlets and magazines from the newly-formed Communist literary club; he wrote his first revolutionary poem at sunrise. Impressed by the feelings of respect and belonging he enjoyed there, Wright quickly became a prominent member of the John Reed Club and, not long after, the Communist Party. He wrote to a friend, “the Communist Party had been the only road out of the Black Belt of Chicago for me. Hence Communism had not simply been a fad, a hobby; it had a deeply functional meaning for my life.”

Wright found himself fast-tracked into leadership positions within the Party’s literary circles. Communist publications launched his career by regularly printing his writing. By 1937, Wright was Harlem editor of the Communist newspaper *Daily Worker*, and his essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” outlined the revolutionary potentials of Marxist literature: “to furnish moral sanctions for action, to give a meaning to blighted lives, and to supply motives for mass movements of millions of people.” A few years later, Wright’s own deeply political novel *Native Son* garnered public praise from the Party, eager to capitalize on the national sensation. Privately, however, members were disappointed that the novel offered a portrait of one troubled individual, not a landscape of collective rebellion. Party writers were expected to produce literature that directly benefitted the revolutionary cause, not their own creative vision.

Within *Native Son*, tensions in Wright’s own Party allegiance began to show. In the courtroom, Bigger’s lawyer Boris Max delivers a thirteen-page speech blaming Bigger’s crimes on centuries of racist oppression and economic exploitation—a recitation of standard Party doctrine. Literary critics ridiculed the speech for clumsily shoe-horning Wright’s own politics into the fiction. But did Wright’s beliefs actually match Max’s? The novel sometimes seems to ennoble Max as a selfless social justice advocate, while at other times, Max, and especially his fellow comrades Jan Erlone and Mary Dalton, are painted as dangerously naïve and, worse, incapable of understanding Bigger as a human being. Max’s Communist vision is ultimately mismatched with Bigger’s understanding of freedom.

The court scene, which is absent from Nambi E. Kelley’s theatrical adaptation, hints at Wright’s growing dissatisfaction with the Party. Wright had initially been impressed by the Party’s analysis of the economic and political “Negro Question”—but over Wright’s decade-long membership, the Party failed to commit to a consistent political position on black nationhood, and their anti-racist efforts proved weak. Their good will ultimately lent them only a very narrow understanding of what it meant to be black in America, as Wright later observed, “The Communists, I felt, had oversimplified the experience of those men whom they sought to lead.”

Max flattened Bigger into a political symbol, not a person, and Wright feared the same fate. In 1935, the Party shut down his beloved John Reed Club, paranoid that the independent local clubs had strayed too far from Party control. By 1941 he watched his literary friends disband, as he too chafed under a manipulative leadership that saw him only as a tool for propaganda. “I had my way of expressing my conception of Negro experience in my writing. I thought it would be of value to them. They had their ideas of how I should react as a Communist. There was an irreconcilable gap between our attitudes,” Wright lamented. While Wright at first felt Marxism afforded him dignity he could find nowhere else, he finally chose his artistic freedom over Party allegiance.

Wright formally left the Party in 1942, decrying its members as “narrow-minded, bigoted, intolerant and frightened of new ideas which don’t fit into their own” in his scathing takedown “I Tried to be a Communist.” In retaliation, the Party branded their former darling a traitor, violently threw him out of a May Day parade, and published articles skewering Wright’s reputation in the very paper he used to edit.

—MOLLY FITZMAURICE

QUESTIONS

After reading about Wright’s relationship to politics, and the Communist Party, when you read or watch the play, think about what both Wright and Kelley are trying to say about American society. What might be Wright’s point of view? What might be Kelley’s? Are they they same? Different? How does each character in the story view the world?
SUZAN-LORI PARKS Named one of *Time* Magazine’s “100 Innovators for the Next New Wave” in 2002, Suzan-Lori Parks became the first African American woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for her Broadway hit *Topdog/Underdog*. A MacArthur “Genius” Award and Gish Prize recipient, she has also been awarded grants by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts. *Father Comes Home From the Wars, Parts 1, 2 & 3* had its world premiere at The Public Theater and has also been staged at American Repertory Theater and Center Theatre Group. The play was named a finalist for the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and was awarded the 2015 Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama Inspired by American History as well as the 2014 Horton Foote Prize. Parks’s work on *The Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess* was honored with the 2012 Tony Award. Her numerous plays include *The Book of Grace*, *In the Blood* (2000 Pulitzer Prize finalist), *Venus* (1996 OBIE Award), *365 Days/365 Plays*, and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, among others. Parks’s novel *Getting Mother’s Body* was published by Random House. Her screenplays include *Girl 6* written for Spike Lee, as well as works for Brad Pitt, Denzel Washington, and Jodie Foster. Her adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* premiered on ABC’s “Oprah Winfrey Presents.” Parks is currently writing an adaptation of the film *The Harder They Come* for a live stage musical. Parks is the Master Writer Chair at The Public Theater, and she serves as a professor in dramatic writing at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts.

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PART 1: A Measure of a Man

The first part of Father Comes Home From the Wars takes place outside a slave cabin in Far West Texas in the spring of 1862. A chorus of slaves discusses how one of their number, Hero, has been chosen by the Master to accompany him to the war. The Master has promised Hero his freedom if Hero fights with him—the only problem is the Master is fighting for the south. The slaves suggest that Hero could run away instead of fight. Meanwhile, Hero’s dog, Oddsee, is missing. Hero appears and discusses his dilemma with the Old Man, his adopted father, and Penny, his wife. Hero realizes he could stay on the farm if he were injured in some way, and asks the Old Man to cut off his foot. As the Old Man raises the knife, another slave, Homer, finds them. Homer once tried to run away, but was caught. His punishment was to have his own foot chopped off. Seeing Homer, the Old Man cannot harm Hero, and Hero cannot bring himself to cut off his own foot. Homer tells the gathered crowd that it was Hero who led the Master to him when he ran away and Hero who cut off Homer’s foot, in return for the promise of freedom. Hero, ashamed, decides he must go with the Master. The slaves bid him farewell.
PART 2: A Battle in the Wilderness

Part two finds Hero and his master, the Colonel, in the middle of the war—late summer, 1862—in the woods a few miles from the battlefield. The Colonel has captured a Union captain, Smith. The Colonel taunts Smith, whom he keeps in a makeshift wooden cage. The Colonel identifies Smith's unit as the 1st Kansas Colored Infantry, made up of free black men under white commanders. When Hero comes back from collecting wood, the Colonel taunts Smith and kicks him in his wounded leg. Hero tells the Colonel that both armies are approaching, and the Colonel goes off to see for himself. Hero realizes that Smith is wearing two jackets—he's not actually a captain. In fact, he’s a soldier in the colored infantry—a black man fighting for the Union. If the Colonel discovers Smith’s real identity, which he will when he brings Smith back to the Confederate Army, Smith will be shot. The Colonel returns and tells Smith and Hero that it’s time to rejoin the troops. Smith walks slowly with his injured leg—the Colonel decides to go ahead, with Hero and Smith following behind. Hero tells Smith to run back to the Union army. Smith gives Hero his Union jackets, which Hero puts on—underneath his Confederate jacket. Hero turns back toward the Colonel and the South.

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PART 3: The Union of My Confederate Parts

The final part of the play returns to the slave cabin in West Texas, in the fall of 1863. A band of runaway slaves has stopped for food at the cabin before they continue on their way. Homer and Penny have been living together in Hero’s absence. The runaway slaves convince Homer to leave with them. Penny finds them and tells them that the mistress has gotten two pieces of news: the Emancipation Proclamation has freed the slaves, and the Master and Hero have been killed in battle. Penny decides to go with Homer and the runaway slaves, but as she does Oddsee, Hero’s lost dog, returns to the farm and tells them that Hero is not dead, and will be home momentarily. Hero has taken a new name—he now calls himself Ulysses. Ulysses brings tales from the war, gifts, and a picture of a woman he married while away. Penny decides to leave Ulysses, for whom she has been waiting, with Homer and the slaves. Ulysses stays to bury the Master and begin his new life on the farm.
Directors are theatre artists who are responsible for the overall vision of the production. They guide actors in the interpretation of the text and work with designers to imagine the physical elements of the production, including scenery, costumes, lights, and sound. Liz Diamond, director of *Father Comes Home From the Wars, Parts 1, 2 & 3* by Pulitzer Prize winner Suzan-Lori Parks, sat down with Yale Rep Artistic Coordinator Jocelyn Prince to discuss her long artistic relationship with Parks; the world she plans to create for *Father Comes Home from the Wars*; and the journey towards personal freedom for the play’s main character, Hero.

**JOCELYN PRINCE:** You directed Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The Death of the Last Black Man* in 1992 and *The America Play* in 1994 at Yale Rep, so this is a reunion for you and Parks. What do you remember about working with her in the early ’90s, and what do you look forward to about working on one of her plays today?

**LIZ DIAMOND:** I met Suzan-Lori in 1988 when she was 26 and new to New York City. I was a young director making my way; I had recently finished my graduate training. We started working together at BACA Downtown, an experimental theatre in Brooklyn. I directed a workshop of one of her first plays, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*—and I just fell in love with her work, with the stories she was telling, with her voice as writer, and with Suzan-Lori herself, this blazingly smart, fierce, funny, vibrant young artist. What I remember most about our collaboration was how in sync we worked: how tenaciously we would wrestle with an artistic question or problem, and how much fun we had riffing on each other’s ideas and building our understanding of the production worlds together.

I love poetic writing, wordplay, and humor—especially humor that is subversive, that sneaks up on you and gets under your skin. Suzan-Lori’s early plays at first read a bit like puzzles. But once you cracked the code, which usually happened as soon as you read them aloud, you could see the dramatic action. The plays were full of completely original, tragic, hilarious characters in situations at once entirely real and mythic in their reach. This latest play, *Father Comes Home From the Wars*, is a masterpiece, I think—it is a very sophisticated dramatic text, yet it doesn’t show off its sophistication. You don’t feel the “work” in the writing. Suzan-Lori continues to layer meaning through wordplay, allusion, and irony, and the storytelling is swift and full of surprising turns and twists. She’s at the top of her game with this play.
JP: *Father Comes Home From the Wars* draws from the historical period of the American Civil War and remnants of ancient epic Greek poetry, most specifically Homer’s *The Odyssey*. How would you describe the world of this play?

LD: The opening stage direction suggests a liminal world: “Part 1—Early Spring, 1862—A slave cabin in the middle of nowhere.” That phrase—*in the middle of nowhere*—is beautifully suggestive. The cabin is a place that’s hard to leave, because it’s what the slaves know, but it’s in the middle of nowhere: a place where you don’t know where you are, or, really, who you are. The next stage direction reads: “Far West Texas. One hour before dawn.” The world of this play is a place that’s betwixt and between, in a time suspended between night and day. It’s a time of indecision, of waiting for an answer to big questions: will Hero go to the War? Or defy his Master and stay at home? Will the War be won by the North or South? Will freedom come? Because Suzan-Lori plays with linguistic anachronism—the slaves use slang we hear today like “jet” and “snap”—there’s a haunting suggestion that this “nowhere” is where we still remain. True freedom has not yet come. We are still waiting.

JP: How does Hero’s journey in the play mirror the journey of Odysseus in Homer’s epic poem?

LD: It’s not in a one-to-one way, but in a brilliantly playful, sideways way with which Suzan-Lori pays homage to *The Odyssey*. Suzan-Lori knows Homer’s great epic. Like Homer, she has a tragic and comic vision of the human condition. Insofar as Hero is a hero—which is to say, a man thrust into the struggle of war who must make momentous decisions to finally find his way home—Hero is Odysseus’ literary descendant, for sure. But unlike Odysseus, “home” for Hero is obscure, not a place he knows or remembers. And the obstacles Hero faces on his journey are not caused by the whims of the gods, but by people, by history, and by the limits of his own understanding. Suzan-Lori says this will ultimately be an epic of nine parts or more. We are doing the three parts she has written so far. It’s anybody’s guess what kinds of adventures and struggles she will put her Hero through before she ends his story. I sense that, at the heart of this enormous project, is Suzan-Lori’s yearning to write a Homeric epic for our time, to get us to see, finally, what home and freedom really mean. How do you recognize, understand, and practice freedom? What does it cost, so to speak, to become free?

JP: What do you think it costs Hero?

LD: So far, by the end of Parts 1, 2, and 3, a whole lot. At the end of Part 3, Hero has his freedom: he has a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation in his pocket, at any rate. He has a new wife, too, but he’s lost his “almost-wife” Penny and his virtual brother, Homer, because of his disloyalty towards them. His Master, to whom Hero gave all of his loyalty, has died without keeping his promise to free Hero, the very thing for which Hero sacrificed everything. Hero has come home, all right, but to that
In *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus asks Demodocus to sing about the Trojan War—specifically about the Trojan Horse sabotage that Odysseus himself led, it is hearing his own war story retold that allows Odysseus to reveal his true identity. The war veteran then tells his own stories—both about what he experienced and the trials of his return home. In stark contrast, in Part 3 of *Father Comes Home*, Ulysses withholds his war stories from Penny and Homer:

**ULYSSES:** I got stories. But I’ll save them.
So many stories. Most of them unspeakable
but I suppose in time I’ll find a way to tell.

Why might Suzan-Lori Parks have left her hero at a loss for words, when the heroes of epic poetry often are forthcoming with their pain and triumphs? Perhaps she’s using this difference to highlight how veterans cope in America—both historically and in our contemporary society. Hampshire College professor and classics scholar Robert E. Meagher studies how ancient Greeks used epic poetry and drama to help their society work through war trauma. According to Meagher, this ritualized practice differs greatly from how we confront trauma in contemporary America. Meagher explains, “Warriors bring their war home with them…like a secret they wish they hadn’t been told… They are expected to deny their own pain, ignore what war has taught them, and take up their civil status as heroes.” He goes on, describing how “these ancient societies had rituals for healing invisible wounds…We don’t. Our rituals are not ones that are aimed at healing… these don’t address the healing that needs to occur within veterans…We don’t have any longer the cultural categories for articulating the nature of what this particular wound is. And this is where in Ancient Greece, they speak about those same wounds—they have words for it—and they also have rituals that at least go a way towards addressing and healing those wounds.”

—SOPHIE SIEGEL-WARREN

**QUESTIONS**

The following pages of the Study Guide explore both the American Civil War and Homer’s epic which unfolds during the Trojan War. Keep in mind the journey of the veteran. **How are the veterans in these stories welcomed or rejected by friends and loved ones upon their homecoming? What do you think that Suzan-Lori Parks’s play says about the United States today, given how she juxtaposes this period of American history with an ancient Greek poem?**
While the Southern economy relied on plantations and slavery, the Northern economy thrived off industry and machinery. These economies functioned together, but their fundamental values clashed: one endorsed enslavement and the other endorsed emancipation. Revolution brewed as enslaved people—bravely and desperately seeking their freedom—first began to escape north. There, they received refuge, the rights and privileges of citizenship, and employment as laborers and soldiers. Though they freed themselves by leaving bondage behind, slavery as a legal institution remained intact: the federal government could not unilaterally abolish slavery—that is, it could not directly and permanently intervene in the lives of individual Americans—unless the Constitution of the United States was amended.

As the nation expanded during the mid-1800s, it became especially troubled by the question of whether new territories entering the nation would be slave states or free states. The South generally advocated for popular rights and states’ rights—meaning that the issue of slavery would be settled locally among residents. The North, however, advanced federal sovereignty—meaning that the issue of slavery would be settled by the government and handed down to states and individuals. So, as the South developed a sense of national identity based on their own regional and territorial interests, the North cultivated a definition of nationhood that depended on unity, that is, on the Union remaining “one nation, indivisible, under God.”

When Abraham Lincoln ascended to the presidency in 1860, South Carolina called a state convention. It unanimously voted for secession, leaving the Union, and adopted the “Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union,” which argued for states’ rights to nullify federal laws and secede from the nation. South Carolina was promptly followed by Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas—some of which considered slaveholding a constitutional right. In February 1861, the seceded states formed the Confederate States of America.

In his First Inaugural Address, delivered Monday, March 4, 1861, on the day he was sworn into office, Lincoln denounced secession as “legally void” and held that “acts of violence within any State or States against the authority of the United States are insurrectionary or revolutionary.” For Lincoln, the preservation and defense of the Union was of great importance; if the Union broke apart, it would be “less perfect,” categorically short of the “more perfect Union” that the Founding Fathers meant it to be in the Constitution. In search of “a peaceful solution of the national troubles and the restoration of fraternal sympathies and affections,” he wouldn’t deploy violence, except to maintain possession of federal property and Union-occupied forts, nor would he abolish slavery in the Southern states. He concluded with an appeal to the citizenry’s strained bonds of affection: “The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

When delegates from the South approached Lincoln with a peace treaty, Lincoln declined, claiming that to join in treaty with the Confederacy would be to recognize it as a legitimate and sovereign government, which it was not. And when the Confederacy captured the Union-occupied Fort Sumter, Lincoln retaliated with force.

—ASHLEY CHANG
THE NEW STATE OF TEXAS
In December 1825, Texas became the 28th state in the Union. It joined the Union as a slave state, with some 30,000 slaves—almost a quarter of the state’s population. Many were concerned about Texas’s entrance into the Union as a slave state—abolitionists thought admitting a state that size would tip the balance of Congress in favor of slaveholders. Tensions between the North and South increased, setting the stage for the Civil War.

1845
December 29
Texas becomes a U.S. state.

1860
November 6
Abraham Lincoln is elected President of the United States.

December 20
South Carolina secedes from the Union, followed by ten other Southern states.

1861
February 1
Texas secedes from the Union.

April 12
Confederate forces’ attack on Fort Sumter begins the Civil War.

1862
Spring
Setting for Father Comes Home From the Wars, Part 1.

August
The First Kansas Colored Infantry is formed.

THE FIRST KANSAS COLORED INFANTRY
Kansas was admitted to the Union in 1861 as a free state, after a hot and sometimes violent debate about the question of slavery in the new state. In August 1862, U.S. Senator James Henry Lane formed a regiment of African Americans to serve in the Civil War. The First Kansas Colored Infantry were the first African American soldiers recruited in the North, and they were the first to die in battle for the Union. The First Kansas Colored Infantry acquitted themselves bravely and honorably in battle, even as they were treated brutally by Confederate troops. During the Battle of Poison Springs in 1864, Confederate soldiers brutally executed wounded and captured black soldiers.

GENERAL ORDER NUMBER 3
The People of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and free laborer.
JUNETEENTH
Even though Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all the slaves in the United States, took effect on January 1, 1863, the news did not reach Texas until two and a half years later. On June 19, 1865, General Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas, with an order called “General Order Number 3,” which officially freed the slaves of Texas. After learning that they were free, many former slaves immediately left the plantations to begin new lives. The day of emancipation was called “Juneteenth,” and has become a holiday celebrating freedom and education.

CONSCRIPTION
On April 6 and 7, 1862, Union and Confederate forces clashed in Shiloh, Tennessee. The Battle of Shiloh was the first to cause massive casualties; over 10,000 Confederate soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured. Days after Shiloh, on April 16, 1862, the Confederate Congress passed a conscription act—any man between 18 and 35 had to join the army. By the end of the war, any man between 17 and 50 had to fight. In Texas, any slaveholder with more than 20 slaves was exempt from the draft. This meant that conscription was mostly aimed at small farmers with few or no slaves.

Summer and Fall
Setting of Father Comes Home From the Wars, Part 2. This summer and fall, Southern forces advance north of D.C., culminating in the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest day in U.S military history.

1863
January 1
President Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation.

Fall
Setting of Father Comes Home From the Wars, Part 3.

November 19
Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address

1865
April 9
The Civil War ends when Robert E. Lee surrenders at Appomattox, Virginia.

June 19
News of the emancipation reaches Texas.

Freed slaves, Richmond, Virginia, 1865.
Heroes’ Odysseys: The Epics of Homer and Suzan-Lori Parks

In the epic poem *The Odyssey*, the ancient Greek poet Homer tells the story of the homecoming of Odysseus, a great hero of the Trojan War. Fought between the Greeks and the Trojans over the most beautiful woman in the world, the Trojan War lasts for ten whole years. When the war ends, it takes Odysseus another ten years—of adventures and wanderings, shipwrecks and temptations—to return home to Ithaca, an island off the western coast of Greece, where his wife Penelope has awaited him for those two long decades. The idea of nostalgia comes from this *nostos*, this tale of Odysseus’s return home. Nostalgia, the ache one feels for home, combines *nostos* with *algia*, the Greek word for pain.

Suzan Lori-Parks’s *Father Comes Home From the Wars, Parts 1, 2 & 3* remixes Homer’s *Odyssey* into a collage, a piece of art made up of other artworks: she simultaneously draws on the deep well of Homer’s greatness and places it in service of her vision of reality. Parks’s characters contain criss-crossed allusions to ancient Greece and Civil War America. Hero has been the Boss-Master’s slave for ten years, the same amount of time Odysseus spent at war. Hero comes home from the war as Ulysses, which is the Roman name for Odysseus, as well as the name of the Commanding General of the Union army, Ulysses S. Grant. The name of Hero’s wife, Penny, is a diminutive—a short, sweet version—of Penelope, the name of Odysseus’s wife, and it conjures themes of money and value, the price of freedom and the price of people. Homer, Hero’s friend and Penny’s suitor, takes the name of the great poet himself. Odysseus has a faithful dog named Argos. Hero’s faithful dog with crazy eyes is called Oddsee, which sounds like the title of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Within this wild constellation of names alone, Parks compresses and contorts the original *Odyssey*, enveloping not just the story but also the author and his art, so that all elements of the original are flattened and rearranged into a new kind of epic—one that, said Parks in a 2014 NPR interview, “gives people an opportunity to reflect about the world we all live in.” After all, the United States is still plagued by the concept of race. “The same things that went on, you know, several hundred years ago are happening again.”

In poetic verse, “Part 1: A Measure of a Man” frames Hero’s choice to stay on the plantation or go to war. Though he has not yet left his home, the structure of Part 1 loosely reflects the structure of *The Odyssey*. Like Homer’s Odysseus, whose course home consists of trials and detours, Parks’s Hero pauses to consider many routes that, for him, do not lead home. Will Hero accompany his master to the war, on the promise of freedom but risking death? Or will Hero maim himself to stay at the plantation, forever a slave and crippled, but safe from the mortal dangers of war? Or will Hero run away, escaping both the plantation and the war? What is home, and who will Hero be: a slave or a free man, a coward or a hero? Homer’s Odysseus’ status as a hero is never doubted in the poem—Odysseus remains a hero even when he goes by “No Name” to dupe the Cyclops. But Parks’s Hero looms not so large, ultimately forfeiting even his name.

Switching to the plain language of prose, “Part 2: A Battle in the Wilderness” shows the Master, now a Confederate colonel, and his faithful slave Hero in the thick of the Civil War. They have captured a member of the enemy Union army and hold him captive in a cage. This tableau presents visually the stark hierarchies at play: the relationships are founded on racist beliefs, where different values are placed on different ranks of people. Part 2 recalls Odysseus’ journey to the underworld in Book 11 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus faces not the threat of death but the dead themselves. The ghost of Achilles, a fallen Greek warrior, tells him, “By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man— / some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive— / than rule down here over all the breathless dead.”

Recounting Hero’s return to the plantation, “Part 3: The Union of My Confederate Parts” returns only partially to the poetic language of Part 1—a signal that Hero’s homecoming is fraught, unstable. Odysseus’ homecoming in Homer’s *Odyssey* is a trial of recognition: he must pass several crucial tests to confirm his identity before his journey comes to an end. The same goes for Hero, whose entire being, down to his very name, is changed—and perhaps no longer fits the home that has awaited him.

Just as Homer is lauded as the father of Greek culture for his songs of the origins of Greece and its heroes, so, too, is Parks an author of American culture, recounting a moment when America gave birth to its most profound ideals concerning which lives matter.

—ASHLEY CHANG
Almost nothing is known about Homer, including whether or not such a man existed. As far as we know, however, the ancient Greek poet lived and wrote during the 8th century BCE. His epic poems *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* are considered to be the first works of Western literature. Homer is celebrated for composing clear and detailed depictions of war and peace, honor and disgrace, love and hatred. His poems have the Trojan War as their historical backdrop.

According to Professor Joachim Latacz, “Greeks, Romans, and the European modern age have all fed on Homer, learnt from him, used him to develop their own poetry and poetic studies, imitated him, sought to outdo him and to shake him off—and admired him.”

—SOPHIE SIEGEL-WARREN
Epic poems are **COMPOSED TO BE RECITED**; at first, they were sung with the accompaniment of a lyre.

A **LONG STORY**—often as long as a contemporary novel—that focuses on several events over a long period of time.

The story takes place around a **SPECIFIC HISTORICAL EVENT**, such as the Trojan War.

Epics are versions of stories that have been sung and retold over time. The **FOCUS IS ON THE NARRATIVE**, not on historical accuracy.

The poems are **WRITTEN IN VERSE**, meaning these poems adhere to a specific meter.

The focus of the poem is a **HEROIC JOURNEY**, which includes the adventures of both humans and gods.

The language is **STYLIZED AND LYRICAL**, using lots of similes and metaphors.

Homer used **DACTYLIC HEXAMETER**, which then became the standard for all Greek epics. This meter indicates the rhythm for the poem’s recitation.
TO BE AN EPIC, A POEM MUST...

1. Revolve around a hero of enormous stature
   This hero is able to accomplish tasks most people are unable to do.

2. Include the accomplishment of deeds of superhuman strength and courage
   The hero is able to survive even the most harrowing of challenges and temptations.

3. Take place over a large expanse of time and location
   The story unfolds across several different geographic areas and spans a wide range of time.

4. Include some form of the supernatural
   The story has characters who cheat death and encounter gods, fantastical creatures, speaking animals, etc.

5. Be written with grand style and eloquence
   The writing departs from how we usually speak: the language is overly formal, lyrical, and stylized.

6. Be comprised of several episodes that build to a final confrontation
   The narrative is divided into several clear episodes that conclude in a climax, often the result of some form of confrontation.

THE HERO’S JOURNEY

The hero’s story in epic poetry follows what American scholar Joseph Campbell calls “the monomyth” or the Hero’s Journey. You will likely recognize this archetypal journey from contemporary novels, television, and film. The chart below maps out the trajectory of the monomyth:

QUESTIONS

Think about all the elements of an epic poem. Which of these are present in Father Comes Home From the Wars and which aren’t? Why do you think that Suzan-Lori Parks chose to play off the various aspects of the epic?

—SOPHIE SIEGEL-WARREN
ALSO THIS SEASON

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

BY
HENRIK IBSEN

NEW TRANSLATION BY
PAUL WALSH

DIRECTED BY
JAMES BUNDY

SYNOPSIS

A small town in Norway has just opened a health spa, featuring mineral baths filled with local water. The leaders of the town believe the baths will make them famous, and everyone in the town will benefit from them. Dr. Peter Stockmann is the resident physician at the baths. When he discovers that the water from the baths is contaminated with bacteria, he thinks he has saved the town: with his information, they can fix the problem and keep the baths from making people sick. His friends at the local paper congratulate him and tell him they will support his campaign to fix the baths. His brother, the mayor of the town, has other ideas. Mayor Stockmann tells everyone that Dr. Stockmann’s information is exaggerated. The town cannot afford to fix the baths, and if the public thought the baths were contaminated, it would destroy the town. Slowly, Mayor Stockmann turns everyone against Dr. Stockmann and declares him an enemy of the people. Dr. Stockmann, supported only by his wife and children, vows to stay in the town he tried to save and teach his sons to be freethinkers like him.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) was a 19th-century Norwegian playwright whose work reached far beyond his native country. Often called the “father of realism,” Ibsen perfected the art of creating plays where characters acted and spoke as they do in everyday life, a new style in the late 1800s. His play A Doll’s House, about a woman who went into debt to save her husband, is a landmark piece of feminist literature; he boldly showed a woman striving for independence and equal footing in her marriage. Even today, Ibsen’s plays are regularly performed by theatres around the world. He wrote many major works, but he’s most well known for Peer Gynt, A Doll’s House, The Wild Duck, Hedda Gabler, and The Master Builder, which was produced by Yale Rep in 2009.

But Ibsen was not always seen as a great playwright in his own time. Because he strived for realism, Ibsen showed society as he saw it—capturing positive and negative aspects of life. In his play Ghosts, he wrote about a respectable family poisoned by syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease. Mentioning syphilis alone was scandalous but showing it in the members of a well-to-do family was unheard of. The press gave it terrible reviews, calling it “abominable,” “loathsome,” and downright “gross.” Ibsen was furious at the press and at society for refusing to recognize their hypocrisy. In response, he wrote An Enemy of the People, in which one man stands against society because the truth is more important than the opinion of the press.
ACTIVITY: THE WHISTLEBLOWER

An Enemy of the People has echoed down the generations. Though Ibsen wrote this play more than 130 years ago, the themes in the play are still incredibly relevant today. Dr. Stockmann shows his town a number of what former Vice President Al Gore once called “inconvenient truths:” provable facts that go against popular opinions. Dr. Stockmann is forced to be a whistleblower, a person who calls out illegal, unethical, or dangerous situations. Being in this position, often pitted against people or organizations bigger than the whistleblower, is always a difficult position, whether he or she reports on bullying in the hallway or dumping dangerous substances at a chemical company. Shedding light on hidden problems requires courage.

RESEARCH

Here are a few major events or figures that mirror An Enemy of the People. After you see the play, dig into some newspaper or magazine articles about these cases of whistleblowing. As you research these individuals, think about the forces that these whistleblowers worked against. As Dr. Stockmann declares in the town meeting in Act IV, the real toxicity in the town is not in the water, but in the ignorance of the complacent “solid majority.” Ibsen’s play stands as a monument to free thought, imploring generations of audiences to weigh the facts, and think for themselves.

Lee Anne Walters and Marc Edwards

The town of Flint, Michigan, still suffers from a health crisis: just a few years ago, town officials covered up reports of poisonous levels of lead in the drinking water. A local mother, Lee Anne Walters, teamed up with scientist Marc Edwards to expose the deadly problem. Read John McQuaid’s Smithsonian Story from December 2016, “Without These Whistleblowers, We May Never Have Known the Full Extent of the Flint Water Crisis.”

What is happening in Flint today? What is being done to make the situation better and help the victims?

W. Mark Felt

In 2005, former FBI agent W. Mark Felt revealed to Vanity Fair magazine that he was the infamous “Deep Throat” who tipped off Washington Post journalists about the scandal that ended Nixon’s presidency. Look up John D. O’Connor’s article “I’m the Guy They Called Deep Throat” in the July 2005 issue of Vanity Fair. Why did Felt remain in the shadows for so long and keep his efforts a secret?

Erin Brockovich

In 2000, the film Erin Brockovich opened to glowing reviews and acclaim: lead actor Julia Roberts even won an Oscar for her portrayal of the eponymous protagonist. In the 1990s, legal assistant Erin Brockovich helped to expose contaminated water in the small California town of Hinkley. Watch the film, and then research articles about Hinkley today. What happened to the town at the center of the controversy after the pollution was exposed?

Opposite: An Enemy of the People artwork by Paul Evan Jeffrey. Henrik Ibsen by Gustav Borgen. This page: Lee Anne Walters and Marc Edwards by Noah Berger; W. Mark Felt courtesy of United States Congress; Erin Brockovich by Eva Rinaldi.

—RACHEL CARPMAN AND AMY BORATKO
ABOUT FIELD GUIDE

In Field Guide, the Rude Mechs seek inspiration for how to make a guide for living life from an unlikely source: Fyodor Dostoevsky’s 1880 novel The Brothers Karamazov. This famous Russian book tells a complex family story that results in the murder of patriarch Fyodor Karamazov. Fyodor lives a life of wild decadence, caring mostly about his own pleasure and not about anything or anyone, including his four adult sons Dmitri, Alyosha, Ivan, and Smerdyakov. Through these father-and-son relationships, Dostoevsky pits reason against faith, the rule of law against the rule of God, and hedonism against asceticism. But that’s just one part of Field Guide! Through a contemporary lens and with ample wit, the Rude Mechs not only tackle the novel’s grand philosophical questions, but they create a world filled with stand-up comedy, bears, and dancing cardboard boxes. With six performers and a good deal of ingenious theatrical magic, the Rude Mechs make something completely new from this nineteenth-century tale.

Field Guide is a world premiere which was commissioned by Yale Repertory Theatre. That means that the play is being created for our theatre, and audiences in New Haven will be the first people to see it performed!

NEW AGAIN: INGREDIENTS FOR FIELD GUIDE

Here are a few elements that may appear in the Rude Mechs’ Field Guide. Before coming to the show, pick an item off the list to research. After you see the show, talk about how the “ingredient” that you selected made it into what you saw on stage!

- Fyodor Dostoevsky
- The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky
- The novel’s characters Fyodor Karamazov, Alyosha, Ivan, Dmitri, Smerdyakov, Grusha, Katya, and Zosima
- Grand Inquisitor
- The Brothers Karamazov, a 1958 film starring Yul Brynner
- Stand-Up Comedy
- The Bear, as a symbol in Russian literature and culture
- Famous father-son relationships
- Realism, as captured by Anton Chekhov
- Field guide
- The dove, as a symbol
ABOUT RUDE MECHS

Since 1995, the Texas-based Rude Mechs, an acclaimed ensemble that includes 28 artists, have created and toured dozens of original plays, including *Now Now Oh Now*, *The Method Gun*, *Stop Hitting Yourself*, *Requiem for Tesla*, and *Get Your War On*. *The Method Gun* was written and created for the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville. *Stop Hitting Yourself* was commissioned and produced by Lincoln Center’s LCT3 and was heralded as “Best of 2014” by *Time Out New York*. Their plays have been also seen at Woolly Mammoth, the Wexner Center, the Walker Art Center, and at festivals such as The Public Theater’s Under the Radar, Philadelphia’s Fringe Arts, RADAR LA, and Seattle’s Bumbershoot. Recognizing the impact of the ensemble, *The New York Times* identified Rude Mechs as “making theatre that matters.”

Rude Mechs is an ensemble which means that it’s a collective of artists working together. There are several artists who lead the company, including Madge Darlington, Thomas Graves, Lana Lesley, Kirk Lynn, and Shawn Sides. Many of these artists practice different theatrical disciplines; for example, Hannah Kenah is both writing the play and performing in it, and Robert Fisher is both acting in the play and designing the sound. Most often in large professional theatres, plays are made in a way that casts each artist in a single primary role: for example, a performer performs but does not also design the sets, costumes, or sound.

ACTIVITY: BUILDING BLOCKS

While much might change in *Field Guide* before its world premiere, the Rude Mechs used actual blocks to build the play during its earliest stages. With set designer Eric Dyer, the company created a collection of structures made from cardboard. A great deal of ingenuity went into making each piece—so that boxes and columns might contain hidden features or work in surprising ways—but what resulted was a set of shapes that the ensemble could transform into just about anything.

Think back to when you were little: what could you make with a dozen blocks? Try your hand at the same type of experimentation that the Rude Mechs might have done as they dreamt up *Field Guide*. Work in a small group.

- Collect a set of a dozen blocks of different sizes or shapes. If your school has a “unit set” of portable flats, columns, and set pieces, you could use that, too. You can also assemble a collection of cardboard boxes of different sizes to stack together—just be careful that you don’t stand on or use the boxes in a way that would be unsafe or unsound.

- Set a timer for one minute. Over those 60 seconds, have each group member write down as many *locations* as she or he can think of. If you’re already working together on a play or reading a book in class, perhaps think from a character’s perspective (but don’t limit yourself to what’s explicitly in the story).

- Gather and read your lists aloud. Note what locations come up again and again. Of these repeated places, pick 5.

- Now, take turns working together to create each of these locations as best you can out of the material you have to use.

- Reflect: what did you learn by trying to create specific locations out of a seemingly neutral palate? What were the challenges you faced?
A TIMELINE OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: 2011–14

Kiss takes place in 2014 Damascus. This timeline traces some of the main events of the Syrian conflict from its beginning, up until the play takes place.

2011

Protestors demand the release of teenagers who had been arrested and tortured for anti-regime graffiti. President Bashar al-Assad violently cracks down on the protestors. State security forces open fire on them, killing several. Government troops harshly suppress revolutionary uprisings in other major cities, leading the U.S. and European Union to impose sanctions. According to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Assad has “lost legitimacy.” In response to the military crackdown, rebel groups form: the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian National Council (SNC). The UN Security Council indicts the “widespread violations of human rights and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities,” but Russia and China veto the imposition of any sanctions. Indeed, Russia continues to send weapons to support the Assad regime. That winter, the Arab League suspends Syria and imposes sanctions. Armed conflict breaks out between the FSA and the regime. The FSA attacks a military base near Damascus. A month later, the FSA blames the regime for detonating two deadly car bombs in Damascus, though the government and the U.S. blame al-Qaeda. The Syrian Observatory counts 7,841 deaths in 2011.

2012

The conflict becomes a full-blown civil war, armed by foreign governments. A new rebel group affiliated with al-Qaeda, the al-Nusra Front, urges Sunni Muslims to join the rebellion. The UN General Assembly votes with a landslide majority for Assad’s resignation, but Russia and China veto all measures and sanctions. A transnational collective, the “Group of Friends of the Syrian People,” which includes the United States, declares that the SNC is the legitimate representative of Syria, and pledges financial support. Meanwhile, Assad’s regime and the FSA continue to fight mercilessly for control of several cities. Factions of the FSA carry out massacres in Alawite villages. The Kurdish minority receives control over a northern region of Syria, in agreement with the Assad regime. The UN calls for a ceasefire but fails. That winter, multiple rebel groups unite to form the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which includes the SNC. Turkey, France, the UK, the U.S., and the Gulf states declare the National Coalition the legitimate representative of Syria. The Syrian Observatory counts 49,294 deaths in 2012.
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2013

The rebel groups capture the city of Raqqa, prompting the U.S. and the UK to promise them non-military aid. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi merges the al-Nusra Front and al-Qaeda, forming the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), known as Da’esh in Arabic, though this merger is rejected by both the leader of the al-Nusra Front and al-Qaeda. ISIS assassinates two FSA leaders. The Assad regime attacks suburbs of Damascus with rockets filled with sarin, a lethal nerve agent, killing many civilians. While the UK decides not to intervene in the conflict, President Obama announces that the U.S. will bomb Syria, but only after Congressional approval, which does not pass. The UN discovers the use of chemical weapons, which the Security Council condemns. Assad agrees to begin the process of dismantling the regime’s chemical weapons arsenal. In December, the U.S. and the UK cease providing aid to the rebels. The Syrian Observatory counts 73,447 deaths in 2013.

2014

Syria approaches its fourth year of conflict. There have been so many casualties that the UN announces that it will stop updating its death toll. Rebel-held areas are besieged by bombing and poison gas attacks. People are under threat of arrest, torture, and exile. The Syrian Observatory counts 76,021 deaths in 2014, including 3,501 children.

continued on next page

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: Guillermo Calderón

Guillermo Calderón was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1971, during the regime of socialist president Salvador Allende. When Calderón was four, Augusto Pinochet staged a violent coup d’état and seized power, installing a dictatorship that murdered Calderón’s uncle. Growing up under Pinochet’s regime, Calderón nursed a deep commitment to political engagement and dissidence, which stayed with him when he studied acting in college and later attended the Dell’Arte International School of Physical Theatre in California and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His plays—which have been produced around the world—raise incisive questions about moral judgments, political ideologies, and the role of the artist in society. Is violence justified when it’s directed towards the overthrow of a violent government? Do politicians say what they truly believe? What is the point of making art when the real world is full of terrible suffering? What is the best way to memorialize a state-sanctioned massacre? How do our allegiances to the nation align—or clash—with our allegiances to our families? What good is idealism if it’s borne of selfish motives? A playwright who wrestles with big ideas, Calderón treats theatre not as an escape from reality but as a forum for heated debate.

Opposite: Kiss artwork by Paul Evan Jeffrey. This page: Guillermo Calderón by Sandra Then.
Kiss forces us to confront what we really know—and don’t know—about other cultures. Many Americans know very little about Syria. What they do know, they’ve seen on the news, or read on their Facebook Newsfeed, but these sources often show only sensational scenes of death and destruction. The top results for a search for “Syria” on YouTube show clips of bombings and battles, air strikes and political debates—almost nothing about the real lives of real Syrians. The Abounaddara Collective offers an alternative, a window into the day-to-day culture of actual people, whose lives are obscured by media headlines and grisly statistics. Like the character of the playwright in Kiss, the Abounaddara Collective provides details in close-up—details that change how people see Syria.

Abounaddara (pronounced AH-boo-nah-DAH-rah), Arabic for “man with glasses,” is a collective of anonymous filmmakers in Syria. They create very short films—sometimes shorter than a minute. Uploaded nearly every week, subtitled in French and English, and freely posted on Vimeo, the shorts show real Syrian individuals living in the midst of revolution, granting a global audience intimate, first-hand access to their experiences. Abounaddara produces these shorts because popular images of the Syrian conflict on TV and the internet indifferently show “mutilated and starved bodies” in order to attract more viewers and profit from more pageviews. But that “shameless broadcasting of the bodies of slain Syrians—which would be unthinkable if the victims were American, French, or Belgian”—produces a false view of Syria and disregards Syrians’ “right to the image.” The “right to the image” is their right to be protagonists of their own story, rather than dangerous or endangered extras on 30-second news reports. It’s their right to their individuality and diversity, their right to be people rather than pixels, their right to their own representation in the media, “based on the principle of human dignity and the right to self-determination.”

Watch one of the Abounaddara Collective’s short films. What stood out to you? What did you learn? What did you see that you had never seen before? How do these images of Syria differ from ones that you’ve seen on the news?

Why might the Abounaddara Collective want to remain anonymous? Why does the playwright in Kiss want to remain anonymous? Do you trust someone more or less when they remain anonymous? Why?

What’s the difference between telling your own story, as the Abounaddara Collective does, versus telling someone else’s story, as the actors in Kiss do? What sort of responsibilities do each of the artists have to their subjects?

—ASHLEY CHANG
THEATRE ETIQUETTE

YOUR STARRING ROLE
The play can’t exist without you. Unlike film and television, theatre requires spectators to complete the experience. Each performance is completely unique, because the actors listen to your responses and feed off of your energy. Together, you and the company onstage bring a script alive. Being an audience member is an important responsibility.

PLAY YOUR PART:
TURN OFF YOUR PHONE.
Taking photographs or using any recording equipment (camera, smartphone, iPhone, etc.) is NOT PERMITTED at any time in the theatre before, during, or after the performance. The lights and sounds from electronics can be distracting to the cast and, in turn, potentially dangerous, especially during fight sequences. The professional actors’ union restricts when photos can be taken and how they are used. It is also very distracting for your fellow audience members.

TUNE IN.
Settle into your seat and prepare to be transported and transformed by the magic of theatre. Read your program to learn more about the actors and designers. Familiarize yourself with the emergency exits, and stow your belongings under your seat.

FOLLOW SNACK RULES.
Do not eat or drink during the performance. Yale Rep may sell concessions and snacks in the lounge. Ask your teacher or chaperone for permission to buy snacks before the show or during intermission. Food or drinks purchased outside the theatre will not be allowed in the building, unless arranged ahead of time by your teacher.

FOCUS ON THE LIMELIGHT.
Acting in front of a live audience requires a tremendous amount of concentration, so please respect both the professional artists and your fellow theatregoers. Theatres are constructed to carry sound efficiently. While gasps of surprise or delighted laughter are most welcome, gum snapping, wrappers crinkling, and seatmates chatting are distracting to everyone onstage and off. If you must speak because of an emergency, whisper and keep your exchange as quick as possible.

REMAIN SEATED DURING THE PERFORMANCE.
Use the restrooms before the show begins or during intermission. If you must leave the theatre during the performance, you may need to wait until a break in the action onstage to be allowed back inside. During some performances actors may travel up and down aisles for entrances or exits, increasing the need for audience members to remain safely in their seats during the show.

BRAVO!
When the play is over, show your appreciation with applause during the curtain call. If you loved it, rise to your feet and offer a standing ovation to the bowing actors!

— JOCELYN PRINCE

FUN FACTS: THE HISTORY OF AUDIENCES AND SPECTATORSHIP

• Yale Repertory Theatre space seats up to 487, and the University Theatre space can seat as many as 620. Did you know that the Theatre of Dionysus in Ancient Greece could hold 14,000–17,000?

• Today, theatregoers typically sit quietly. Most Londoners in the late 1500s and 1600s attending Shakespeare plays didn’t watch in silence from their seats. They clapped for the heroes, booed the villains, and cheered the special effects. And the cheapest seats in many Elizabethan theatres were in the pit—which meant that many people stood right in front of the stage!

• Have you ever seen a play performed somewhere other than a theatre building? In medieval England, in the town of York, once a year dozens of guilds produced parts of Christ’s story and performed these short plays on wagons that stopped in 12 locations around town. Just a few decades ago in California, El Teatro Campesino created specifically Mexican American theatre, exploring Chicano mythology and history. Many of their early performances took place on the picket lines during the California agricultural workers’ strikes in the 1960s.

— JOCELYN PRINCE