

Relevant Unit Objectives

Module 1: African American Community and Culture

This lesson addresses the following Essential Questions:

- How did the existence of slavery shape African American communal life and cultural expression?
- How is a community defined?
- How was the African American community defined?

Objectives of the Lesson

Aim

Why was it important for African Americans to perform in and attend theatrical productions in pre-Civil War New York?

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Evaluate the importance of cultural expression in general and theatrical performance in particular to the African-American community in antebellum New York
- Identify the historical contributions of the African Grove Theater
- Contrast racial attitudes toward actors in antebellum New York with those of present-day New York

Introduction

Ask students to recall the last movie or television show they watched. On a sheet of paper, write down the main characters and, for each, identify the actor's racial identity.

What did they find? Did the movie or show they watched have a mixed cast? Are there some television shows or movies in which the entire cast is white? Are there some in which the entire cast is black? Is the cast predominantly but not exclusively one or the other? What conclusions, if any, can students draw about the intended audience from the racial composition of the cast? Would they be more likely to watch a show or movie if it had a particular racial composition? What conclusions, if any, can they draw about race relations in the United States today from their findings?

Instructional Procedures**Step One:**

Distribute copies of the “African Grove” entry from Wikipedia, available at:

http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Grove

Ask students to read the article and underline the three pieces of information they find most intriguing. Briefly poll students on which sections they underlined and why.

Step Two:

The teacher will lead a discussion based on the following questions:

1. Are students surprised that a man described as a “ship’s steward” would want to found a theater company? Why or why not?
2. The article notes that there were several efforts besides the African Grove to found a black theater company. Why do you think was so important to the community at the time?
3. Why did the African Grove draw heavily on Shakespearean drama? Would you have expected them to perform different sorts of plays? Why or why not?
4. Where do you imagine the actors received the knowledge and training to perform Shakespeare? Where might the producers have gotten the resources to provide costumes, scenery, etc.?
5. Why might Othello and Richard III have been the most popular dramas presented?
6. How does the fact that black audiences came to see these productions challenge common stereotypes about the African American community of that time?
7. Similarly, how does the fact that the company was able to find enough actors qualified to play Shakespearean roles challenge common conceptions about African Americans of that time?
8. Why do you think audiences would come see these productions? Was it simply because it was the only theater they were allowed to attend? Was there any particular attraction to attending a show in which black people played Shakespearean parts?
9. Why might some white people have attended these productions?
10. What does the inability of the Grove Theater to sustain itself in the face of harassment by the police and general hostility from white neighbors tell us about race relations in New York at that time?

Concluding Discussion

In this part of the discussion, the teacher will ask students to make connections between the African Grove Theater and the African American presence in New York theater today. The teacher will begin by explaining that over time, black actors have been able to participate in theatrical productions, although at first they could only play parts specifically designated as African American (for example, Paul Robeson played Othello on Broadway in the 1940s; the remainder of the cast was white). As recently as the 1960s and 1970s, it was common to find “all black” productions of major works: for example, there was an all-black production of the musical Hello, Dolly! in 1967 starring Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway; an all-black production of Guys and Dolls ran on Broadway for over six months in the mid-1970s. More recently, however, it has become common for African-American actors to play roles in Broadway productions regardless of whether they were originally designated as black characters or not (as was the case in Robeson’s day). Denzel Washington starred as Brutus in a production of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar in 2005; the actor who played Julius Caesar was white. Audra McDonald played Lizzie Curry in the 2007 revival of *In the Shade*; the white actor, John Cullum, played her father.

1. How do changes in the African American presence on the New York stage reflect larger changes in the overall society?
2. Is there still a place for all-black productions of major works in today’s world? Discuss the major arguments for and against such productions.

Materials

“African Grove,” entry from Wikipedia, http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Grove

Website of the New African Grove Black Theater Program at California State University at Dominguez Hills, http://www.csudh.edu/theatre/black_theatre.html