

Women in Theatre

Curated by Milwaukee Youth Theatre

For grades 6th - 9th

Introduction

Did you know that theatre started a very long time ago (532 BC) in ancient Greece? The Greeks loved to put on plays. In fact, it was a central part of their lives. Usually the plays would be **tragic** and would reference their gods and goddesses. However, because women were viewed as inferior to men in Greek culture, women were kept from actively participating in theatre productions. Plays were written and performed by men only. Even the female roles were played by men!

Unfortunately, this tradition of excluding women from participating in theatrical performances continued for a very long time and carried over into other cultures.

Over the years, women have fought to have their voices heard in the world of theatre. Now we have women actors, **playwrights, directors, costume designers** and **scenic designers** as well as women holding other positions within the theatre. Theatre today is still a male dominated field, but women are definitely making their voices heard.

Let's meet some women in the theatre!

Discussion Questions

- What are some reasons you think that women were excluded from participating in theatre?
- Was this right or wrong?
- What other jobs have women been excluded from? Why?

Lorraine Hansberry - Playwright



Lorraine Hansberry wrote one of the most important plays in American theatre history. *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first play written by a Black woman to be **produced** on **Broadway**. Since it first appeared on the stage in 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* has not only been performed millions of times across the globe but has also been made into 3 movies

and a **musical**.

Hansberry's play is about a black family trying to improve their financial situation and move from a run down apartment and into their own home. It was inspired by Hansberry's own family's personal experience fighting segregation and unfair housing regulations in Chicago. The title was taken from a poem by Langston Hughes entitled: *Harlem*.

Harlem BY LANGSTON HUGHES

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Discussion questions

- What is a dream deferred?
- Why do you think Hansberry chose the title that she did?

Activities

- Read *Harlem* out loud to the class. Have the students write down the dreams they have for their own lives. Big and small. Silly and serious. Have them narrow their list down to the dream that is the most important to them and then using colored pencils, crayons, markers or anything they have, have them create a map of how they can achieve their dream. When they are done with this exercise, set aside some time for the students to share their dreams and maps. Then ask them “what if this way did not work? Can you think of another way?” The students can brainstorm new ideas together. Sometimes, it takes more perseverance and creativity to reach our goals.
- Read *A Raisin in the Sun* as a class or watch this version of the play on YouTube: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=jzfgwxENvLk>
- Every script comes with a list of characters. This tells the director how many actors they need to put on a show and it tells the actors something about the character they will be playing. Ask the student if they were to turn their lives into a play, what characters would be in their play? Have them create a list of no more than 12 characters with names and descriptions. Remind them to not forget to add themselves. Sample character list: <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/raisin/characters/>

Ruth E. Carter, Costume Designer



I'm sure that you have heard about, and probably seen, the movie *Black Panther*. But did you know that Ruth E. Carter, the costume designer who won Marvel it's first Academy Award, got her start in theatre?

After graduating from College with her art degree Ms. Carter started working for the Santa Fe Opera and then the Los Angeles Theatre Center. It was there that she met the Director Spike Lee and her film career took off.

As a costume designer it is Ms. Carter's job to show us who a person is and reveal something secret about them, all through what they are wearing. She uses color, texture and pattern to enhance the story being told. Ruth has been a designer for over 30 years and has mastered the art of costuming many different time periods and **genres**. For her *Black Panther* designs, she did a lot of historical research, even taking trips to multiple regions across Africa to educate herself on tribal designs and ask permission to use traditional tribal **motifs** in her costumes. Carter said that "exploring the past, in the present" is a key element in everything she designs.

Discussion

- Why do you think it was important for Ruth E. Carter to be given tribal permission to use certain design elements in her work?
- What do you think she means by "exploring the past, in the present"?

Activities

- View a slideshow of Ms. Carter's work: <https://ruthecarter.com/> Ask the student what they like about Ms. Carter's work, what they don't like. What do they think about the characters wearing those costumes? What does the costume tell us about them? How does it say this?
- Print out copies of basic design silhouettes provided and have the students design what their outfit would look like if they were a citizen of Wakanda. Encourage them to use color, shape and texture to show who they are. Ask students to present their designs and rationalize their design choices. If you are virtual, you can direct students over to [Character Creator](#) and ask them to do the same exact

thing. They can take a screen capture and share with the class.

Bunny Christie: Scenic Designer



Female set designers have to work extra hard to get the jobs and recognition that their male counterparts receive. It is a tough job for a woman to break into but some have done it. Bunny Christie is one of them.

Christie's job as a set designer is not just to establish the physical space that the actors walk around on, but to create a world that pulls the audience in and makes them want to see more of it.

Christie came to the attention of the theatre world in 2014 with her amazing designs for the show *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*. The show earned her awards and praise for its unique use of space and light. She deliberately set out to heighten the audience's senses in order to mimic what was happening within the mind of the play's lead character.

Discussion

- Why do you think it would be harder for a female to break into the world of set design than costume design?
- What is your favorite space to be in? This could be a room in your house, a space that you visit or even outside. Why is it your favorite? How does it make you feel? Why do you think it makes you feel that way? Think about a space that you don't like to be in. What is it about that space that you dislike? Why?

Activity

- Have the students pick a favorite book or story (not a movie). If they were to turn that story into a play, what would the stage look like? They can draw it, use collage or even create a 3D model. What would be on the stage? What colors would you use? What kind of light or shapes would it have? How would it make the viewer feel to look at it. Ask your students to present their designs to the class. Ask the class to give feedback on what works and what doesn't work about the design. Help your students to receive critique by framing it in a "compliment sandwich". Each critique should be started and ended with a compliment.

- Watch this video about the set from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* with your students. Discuss the set design and the feelings that it invoked. [BBC Learning: Design Elements](#).

GLOSSARY

Theatre Definitions

- **Tragic/Tragedy:** A play dealing with tragic events and having an unhappy ending, especially one concerning the downfall of the main character
- **Playwright:** A person who writes plays.
- **Director:** Someone who leads the actors and creative team in the production of a show.
- **Costume Designer:** The person responsible for designing the costumes for a production.
- **Scenic Designer:** The person responsible for designing the world in which the play takes place.
- **Produced/Production:** Taking a written book or script and turning it into a visual performance.
- **Broadway:** A street in New York City famous for its theatres.
- **Musical:** A play in which singing and dancing play a large role.
- **Genre:** A specific type of story. Ex: Comedy, Sci-Fi, Romance
- **Motif:** A distinctive design or pattern

Education standards

TP.Cn.7.i: Career Connections. Describe a profession in theatre.

TP.Cn.11.m: Career Connections. Explore and differentiate theatre professions.

TD.Cr.5.i: Design Assemble, draw, or describe multiple ideas for costumes, props, and/or scenery used for a story.

TD.Cr.6.i: Text/Script Create a scenario for an existing or imagined story that includes production elements.

TD.R.7.m: Analysis Express preferences for effectiveness of theatrical production elements

TD.Cn.9.m: Cultural Social Context Examine how theatre relates to self, others, and the world in the past and present.

TD.Cn.11.m: Career Connections Explore and differentiate theatre production professions



