



Lesson Plan: Drawing Creative Inspiration from Home

OVERVIEW:

This lesson plan is designed to be used with the film *Wrestling with Angels*, a film about award-winning playwright Tony Kushner. Students will see an example of how Kushner's childhood home was a source of artistic inspiration. Then, they will incorporate elements from their own homes into a creative work.

Note: This film has mature themes, and the filmmaker's version contains profanity. To avoid such language, be sure to request the "broadcast version" of this film from the P.O.V. lending library.

P.O.V. documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. In addition, P.O.V. offers a lending library of DVD's and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE!

OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Identify sources of creative inspiration for various artists, writers, and musicians.
- Use viewing skills and note taking strategies to understand and interpret video clips.
- Describe various aspects of their homes and neighborhoods.
- Brainstorm ways that elements from their homes and neighborhoods can be used as a basis for developing a creative work.
- Develop a piece of writing, music, or art inspired by their home or neighborhood.
- Provide peer feedback on the work of fellow students.

GRADE LEVELS: 9-12

SUBJECTS: Art, Drama, English, Music

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- Copy of the film, *Wrestling with Angels* (see Overview section above), DVD player and TV or projector
- Handout: [Viewing Guide](#) (PDF)
- Handout: [My Tour](#) (PDF)

ESTIMATED TIME OF COMPLETION: Two 50-minute class periods, plus time outside of class to develop a creative work

SUGGESTED CLIPS:

Clip 1: Tony Kushner's Childhood (length: 6:36)

The clip begins at 27:02 with the title card, "Lake Charles, Louisiana" and ends at 33:38 with the line, "That's the basement."

Clip 2: “Caroline, or Change” Production (length: 12:43)

The clip begins at 01:16:20 with the line, “When I was in college, I wrote this series...” and ends at 01:29:03 with the line, “And a change of the full concept of the play.”

BACKGROUND:

Playwright Tony Kushner is perhaps best known for his play, “*Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*,” about the impact of AIDS. It earned him a Pulitzer, Tony, and Emmy Award. A prolific writer, Kushner also wrote the musical, “*Caroline, or Change*,” which focuses on an African-American maid named Caroline and her relationship with eight-year-old Noah, the son of the Jewish family she works for in Louisiana. The story takes place in the 1960’s during the height of the Civil Rights Movement and explores issues of race and class. Kushner’s Jewish upbringing in the South provided creative inspiration for many elements in “*Caroline, or Change*.” This lesson uses video clips to give students a tour of important places in Kushner’s childhood and stimulates discussion about how home can be a source of creative inspiration.

For a list of plays and books by Tony Kushner, download [P.O.V.’s Delve Deeper](#) (PDF) for the film, “*Wrestling with Angels*,” developed in collaboration with the American Library Association.

ACTIVITY:

1. Give students five minutes to write a response to the following prompt: Name an artist, writer, or musician you like. What are the sources of this person’s creative inspiration? Take a few minutes to discuss answers. You may want to ask students to think about the creative people you have studied in class and talk about what has inspired their work.
2. Point out to students that many people draw creative ideas from their life experiences. Explain to the class that you are going to show them clips of award-winning playwright Tony Kushner and how he pulled details from his childhood to write the Broadway musical, “*Caroline, or Change*.”
3. Distribute the Viewing Guide handout to focus students’ attention and play the clip of Kushner giving a tour of his home and the community of Lake Charles, Louisiana where he grew up (“Tony Kushner’s Childhood” in the Suggested Clips section above). Students should take notes in the left column of the handout as they watch the clip.
4. After the clip, provide students with a synopsis of Kushner’s Broadway musical, “*Caroline, or Change*” (see Resources section below) and encourage the class to make connections between Kushner’s home and neighborhood and the content of the play. Have students note these connections in the right hand column of the handout.
5. Continue making these connections by showing the class the “*Caroline or Change* Production” video clip and adding to the student notes in the right hand column of the Viewing Guide.
6. Distribute the “My Tour” handout and have students use it to describe details of their homes and neighborhoods and then brainstorm ways that these details could be used to develop a creative work, such as a poem, short story, monologue, painting, photography exhibit, song, etc.
7. Allow students several days outside of class to develop this creative piece. Then, provide time in another class period for students to give peer feedback/review before final pieces are submitted.

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

Students can be assessed on:

- Completion of the handouts for this lesson.
- The quality of feedback provided to their peers.
- Producing a quality creative work inspired by one's home or neighborhood.

EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS:

- Allow time for students to share their creative works with the class, or possibly the school or community as part of a special exhibit or event.
- Explore Kushner's style of expressing his political views through his writing. Watch Act I of the film, *Wrestling with Angels* and identify the political messages in each excerpt of his work that is presented. Should art be used for political purposes? Debate why or why not.
- Watch the approximately six-minute video of Q&A with Tony Kushner at Northwestern University (http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2007/tonykushner/special_video.html). Evaluate Kushner's assertion that his strong debating background was good training for his work as a playwright. What skills are necessary for success in both debate and the theater? How might these skills also fuel success in school now and in other fields later on? Have students evaluate themselves on their personal development of these skills and create personal action plans for how they can address any areas of weakness.
- Define what makes a good commencement speech. Begin by listening to NPR's *Talk of the Nation* discussion, "What Makes a Good Graduation Speech?" (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10513687>) Note what Middlebury College English professor Jay Parini and those who call in to the show think makes a good speech. Then, have the class add their own ideas and create a rubric that they can use to assess Tony Kushner's 2002 commencement speech at Vassar College (http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2007/tonykushner/special_video.html).
- Examine how art forms like theater can influence public health. Watch an 11-minute video excerpt from a 2004 *New York Times* *Talk* panel that discusses how AIDS has been addressed by the theatrical community (http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2007/tonykushner/special_video.html). How might incorporating health issues like AIDS into theatrical productions affect public behaviors and attitudes related to this disease? How would a production about AIDS today be different than one produced in the 1980's? How might audiences from the 1980's and current audiences react differently to AIDS content in a theatrical production? Have students write opinion papers about whether or not playwrights have a moral obligation to explore health issues like AIDS in their work.
- Look deeper at the social messages in Kushner's play, "*Caroline, or Change*" by studying the lyrics of the song, "16 Feet Beneath the Sea." (See the Resources section for a link to these lyrics.) Identify the frustrations that Caroline sings about and compare them to those of other African Americans during this era of U.S. history. (The Primary Sources section of Eyes on the Prize Web site (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/sources/index.html>) is a good resource for such a comparison.) Assess how closely the song lyrics from this production reflect the reality of the period.

RESOURCES:

***Caroline, or Change* the Musical**

<http://www.allmusicals.com/c/carolineorchange.htm>

This site with information on musicals features a synopsis of “*Caroline, or Change*,” plus the lyrics for two of the songs from the production.

Review: *Caroline, or Change*

<http://www.theaterscene.net/ts/articles.nsf/BM/90DF88FB31EB4A2085256E99006F5A1B>

This review by Simon Saltzman describes in detail and critiques Kushner’s Broadway musical, “*Caroline or Change*.”

STANDARDS:

These standards are drawn from "Content Knowledge," a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Civics

Standard 13: Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity.

Language Arts

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Music

Standard 4: Composes and arranges music within specified guidelines.

Standard 7: Understands the relationship between music and history and culture.

Theatre

Standard 6: Understands the context in which theatre, film, television, and electronic media are performed today as well as in the past.

Level IV, Benchmark 5: Understands ways in which personal and cultural experiences can affect an artist’s dramatic work.

U.S. History

Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

Visual Arts

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and culture.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in broadcast journalism, secondary education, and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's Director of Education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource Web site (now PBS Teachers), and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.

