

## **Becoming a Modern American Playwright: Examining Hansberry, Miller, and Edson**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

I grew up in a small town in East Texas where everyone knew everyone else. I went to school with basically the same kids from kindergarten all the way to high school. Every once in a while, a new kid might move in or an old one might move out, but it certainly wasn't a regular occurrence. There was the occasional fistfight and there was a ton of gossip (he said/she said), but for the most part, not much of anything seemed to go on around there. Most of us lived in two-parent households. My parents had divorced, but my grandparents lived with us, so that kind of made up for the absence of one. It seemed like everyone either lived on a good piece of land or if they didn't, they knew someone who did. We spent much of our time roaming over pastures and exploring in the woods. Even in town, we were free to walk the streets, buying an ice cream at the local five and dime and then eating it on the courthouse steps. I never thought much of the freedom with which I lived in my younger years, never really appreciated the idyllic nature of what I was allowed and **able** to do . . . until recently.

I teach drama in an inner-city high school in Houston. It has never ceased to amaze me the kinds of things my students reveal to me about their personal lives. These kids deal with homelessness, job insecurity that forces frequent moves between different schools – many times during the same school year. Many of them have taken drugs, are on drugs, or know plenty of other people who take them and can easily supply them. Most of them are in single-parent households where they don't even get to see the one parent they have because that one has to work all the time in order for them to just barely scrape by. Many of them have already been exposed to violent deaths that are either gang related or from a circumstance due to the low economic areas in which they live.

I see a very high amount of teen pregnancy and teen marriage. It seems like these kids think a baby and/or a husband will provide them with a wealth of love and attention they are otherwise not receiving. They cannot seem to see that beyond the sweet-smelling bundle of joy are the missed opportunities and hard work that come with having a child. Sleepless nights make coming to school appear as a nightmare that cannot be faced. Days filled with a child's sickness that makes catching up on schoolwork seem insurmountable. Maintaining a job becomes more important as the necessity to care for a growing child's needs becomes apparent.

At the request of a parent, I recently began giving a ride to a child who is involved in my after school play program. She lives in an apartment and her parents are very protective of her. They want to make sure she gets home safe and they limit her activities

so that she has fewer opportunities to fall into any bad or dangerous habits. I completely understand this mentality and applaud it, especially knowing how few parents are able to enforce this degree of discipline. But after a few trips, it really made me start to think what **do** these kids do to occupy their time off? I couldn't imagine being cooped up in an apartment all the time, not able to go outside and play, or just hang out with friends. For the first time, the stereotypical image of city kids hanging out at the mall made sense. At least there, the kids have the protection of a public place that has at least some limited security. It must seem safer than some deserted park.

The school I teach at is about four years into a reform effort called "First Things First." The premise of this movement is to divide large urban schools into many smaller learning communities where students would have the same group of teachers throughout all four years of high school. This promotes closer relationships between students and teachers and allows for a higher level of student and teacher accountability. Another facet of this program is that every teacher has a small group of students that they meet with once a week. These are kids that the teacher may or may not have in the actual classroom, but he/she will be their advocate until the students graduate high school. We call these students "advocees."

At the recommendation of a fellow teacher, I started having journal conversations with my group of advoces. Using the fifty-dollar school supply stipend provided at the beginning of each year, I went to Ross and bought twenty beautifully unique journals at a very cheap price. I assigned numbers to the kids and allowed them to come pick out a journal when their number was called. They loved it! I keep the journals with me and the kids write in them each week. It is not for a grade and it is not mandatory, but almost every kid in my group writes in them religiously each week - and every week, I respond. I have found that it is my favorite thing to do. Before we began, I explained to them that I would be the only one to read them, but that there were certain things I was obligated by law to report. Fortunately, those types of things have yet to come up. What has come up is a fascinating journey, back in time, to the days of being a teenager. They write about their hopes and dreams, crushes and rejections. They tell me about achievements they want me to be proud of and worries that they hope I can appease. I hear about the typical family problems and struggle to grow up that every teen goes through as they strive to become individuals in their own right. They've reminded me that everyone has a story, everyone has something that needs to be said. I recalled how some of the best things I've ever written have been in direct relation to events that made an impact on my personal life. I also remember how writing about them helped put things in perspective so that I could deal with them objectively, close a few doors, and then move on with my life. These kids are crying out for understanding from their parents, from their friends, teachers, but most of all, themselves. This is who I am right now! But I might be someone different tomorrow! Let me find my way!

Our society has evolved much over the past fifty years and our young people have more to contribute than we can possibly know. Writing and playwriting have long been

effective and powerful art forms and I believe that it is time for our young people to begin putting their mark on the modern American frontier of theatrical storytelling.

Reading and studying plays is an important branch of any strong theatre program, but there is more to reading a play than – just reading a play. There is ownership. There is background of culture, society, family, and environment. In order to have a play, there must be a playwright. In order to be a playwright, one must have something to write about. It is for this area that I hold a great deal of fascination. How does a person find their story? How can a person take their imagination and experiences that are familiar and turn them into a story?

It is this process that I would like my students to focus on – the process of playwriting. I believe that there is, right now, an elemental, almost primitive, *need* for the words and emotions that this generation has germinating inside their volatile minds and psyches. Writing their own plays based on their own life experiences could be a catalyst for an intense re-examination of life in modern American society.

The leading edge of enlightenment as a student discovers what drives his/her writing, what motivates, what impassions the soul, is a fascinating journey of turning the ordinary into something extraordinary. The depiction of one's own life experiences between the black and white lines of a story is a way of connecting, relating and putting a claim on the right to exist in a seemingly uncontrollable, chaotic world. The beauty of heartbreak can be uplifted, dealt with objectively, then used and turned into a positive force. The emotional, mental, and intellectual benefits are limitless. Choosing a few select playwrights to research and study is a good way to introduce students to the art of playwriting. There are many twentieth-century playwrights whose plays are a reflection of their life and times. It is these artists whose writing I would like to primarily focus on.

## **UNIT BACKGROUND**

The premise of my curriculum unit is the study of a few select American playwrights and how their lives influenced the writing they produced. Many of them turned life into fiction or based their writing on creative non-fiction. It is a basically simplistic idea of “the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.” I want the students to discover through their studies how the topics of the day are interwoven into stories like a thread connecting history to the humanistic experience.

Students will find it necessary to research historical periods in order to understand the context that reality plays in artistic creativity. In many instances, the life story artistically displayed is not found by our society to be pretty or even comfortably viewed, but its depiction is true to life and its impact profound. The analytical study of such pieces can lead students to understand a particular experience or the delicate undertones that connect it to specific periods in time.

The playwrights I feel would be most beneficial to this study are Lorraine Hansberry, Arthur Miller, and Margaret Edson. Their lives had a significant impact on the plays they produced and the students should be able to draw specific conclusions from the research available on each author.

In order to research the many layers surrounding each playwright and play, we will need to put on the guise of “investigative reporters.” We will create huge storyboards that depict political, cultural, societal, and personal lifelines of significant events that had occurred during the time period of each playwright. We will read each play and then delve into the historical contexts that may have contributed to its creation. The students will then take the information and format it to fit the medium of a newspaper so that we can thoroughly explore each aspect of the playwright’s motivation. Students will be able to develop thematic informative sections such as World News, Politics, Editorials, Gossip Column, Biography, and the Society Page. The very nature of this unit means that students will be crossing and combining the curriculums of English, history, journalism, civics, sociology, and theatre. After going through the process of constructing a newspaper on a published playwright, it is my hope that my students will have the ability to create one about themselves and that this study will allow them to see specific themes emerge that are relative to their own lives. At this point, we could then move into a consecutive and related unit that focuses directly on playwriting where each student would be expected to produce their very own one-act play.

The study of plays and playwrights is an important fabric in American society. The continuation of the production of such work is even more important. Maintaining connections with fellow human beings is still essential even amidst the whirr of computers, machines, faxes, modems, and phones. American playwrights have long celebrated ordinary American life and while much has changed, the celebration of life is still a worthwhile topic to pursue. It can change a life. It can even change a nation. At the very least, it can affect how a person looks at the world.

### **THREE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS**

#### **Lorraine Hansberry – *A Raisin in the Sun***

Lorraine Hansberry was born in 1930 in Chicago, Illinois. She grew up in an era where segregation was a distinct line drawn in the sand and any challenge to cross or bend that line was to court dangerous racial tensions. Her father was a real estate broker and encountered neighborhood discrimination on an every day basis. Between 1938 and 1940, he moved his family into a white neighborhood to protest this inequality. The community was hostile and the family had to face hatred and racism in many forms. The state ruled against them, but in a later appeal, the Hansberry family won their case in the U. S. Supreme Court. Although this experience had to take a toll on the heart and mind, the Hansberrys’ struggle helped lead to the eventual breakdown of segregation.

Many other significant events occurred during the lifetime of Lorraine Hansberry, many of them political and cultural. In 1941, the United States entered World War II. Five years later, her father died in Mexico. Mr. Hansberry had wanted to move his family there because of the inescapable nature of racism in the states. In 1947, the first African American to ever play major league baseball joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. His name was Jackie Robinson. 1948 saw Hansberry entering the University of Wisconsin and also marked the end of racial segregation in the U. S. military. She married in 1943 and in 1954, just a year before Rosa Parks decided to keep her seat on a public bus, the U. S. Supreme Court found in favor of Brown vs. Board of Education and declared that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Three years after this, in 1957, Hansberry finished writing her play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, the title inspired from a line in the poem, "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes (*Raisin: A Chronology*).

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Ms. Hansberry uses many of her own experiences to depict the familial and societal struggles that black Americans faced in the 1950s. The basic outline of the play is that the Younger family is coming into a significant sum of money. For years the family has been working itself to the bone, trying to keep up...much less get ahead. The play begins with a sense of expectation and excitement as the family awaits the arrival of an insurance check the father left his family upon his death. There are differing ideas of how the money is to be used which comprises the major conflict of the play. Mama and Ruth (Walter Lee's wife) want to use the money to buy a home and move out of their cramped apartment. Mama also wants to set some aside to pay for her daughter Beneatha's medical school. Walter Lee wants his mother to give all the money to him so he can invest it in a liquor store. He thinks that owning this store would mark the beginning of a continuation of wealth for his family.

When Mama buys a house in an all white neighborhood, it sparks a whole new element of conflict to the plot. Now the family has to decide if living among people who are predisposed to hate and discriminate against them is worth the struggle sure to ensue upon their moving to this neighborhood. The play culminates in an electric, emotional climax, showing Walter Lee standing up to take his place as head of the family even though he has just lost the balance of his father's inheritance through trusting an unscrupulous businessman.

This story is outlined by true to life events that were very much in place at the time and many that are still apparent today. Job availability and equality of pay are still issues that non-whites and women have to contend with today. How do these issues affect the people who struggle against them daily? How does this experience shape a person's character? How are life choices affected by circumstances? Lorraine Hansberry took events significant to her own life and used them to create a wonderfully compelling story.

*A Raisin in the Sun* is also considered an excellent example of the use of Aristotle's "Key Elements of a Play" (Schanker 254). Aristotle lists the key elements as spectacle, sound, diction, character, reasoning, and plot. Out of the six elements, Aristotle placed

the most important emphasis on plot. And although this play can be used to teach these essential principles of playwriting, the impact it has had and will continue to have on society and culture is even more profound.

Previously, African Americans had had a better picture of what the everyday life of a white person entailed. Hansberry's play was the first time such an opportunity had been afforded to whites. She herself states, "The intimacy of knowledge which the Negro may culturally have of white Americans, does not exist in the reverse" (Corley). *Raisin* opened a lot of eyes to lifestyles and home situations that many felt uncomfortable being aware of. Life isn't always pretty and it certainly isn't always fair. But we can be made aware and changes can occur to affect our society and our laws.

### **Arthur Miller – *The Crucible***

Of all plays studied in high school literature, Miller's *The Crucible* is perhaps the most gripping of its kind. There are two approaches to the study of this play that I would like to address. One is content driven by the play itself, which is the witch hunt spurred by the accusations of a group of young girls against many innocent men and women. The other is the parallel to be drawn between the events of the story and the events of the time which involve a modern day witch hunt led by the House Un-American Activities Committee against Americans who were feared to be communists.

Since most people have been exposed to *The Crucible*, I'll spare you a long drawn out summary of the story. Suffice it to say that a group of young girls were caught dancing naked in the woods and out of fear of punishment, made up the story that they had been "witched" to do the things they had done. Their accusations spread like wildfire and soon they along with others in the community were using the accusations to get back at their enemies under the guise of godliness. If the accused confessed their guilt, then they could live (although they forfeit land and profit). But if the accused maintained their innocence, they would be sentenced to death. The intimate side of the story is that Abigail (the ring leader of the girls) had had an affair with John Proctor and wanted to take his wife's place. Proctor had confessed his sin to his wife and they were trying to work out their marital problems when Abigail accuses his wife of witchery. Proctor tries to stand up for the townspeople and prove the girls for liars, but it is easier said than done. Proctor is subsequently condemned and dies for the honor of his name.

The idea for *The Crucible* came from Miller's reading of an 1867 study written by a former mayor of Salem, Charles W. Upham (Miller *Why I Wrote The Crucible*). The story that emerged was based on true accountings of events that took place during the witch trials. As Miller drew deeper and deeper into the writing of his story, the parallels between the witch trials and the actions of the congressional committees were glaringly apparent.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the fear of communism was on the rise. There was a fear that communism was spreading and that it would soon be invading America from the inside out. This sparked an internal investigation by HUAC into the lives of many Americans. This investigation led the government to Hollywood where the movie industry was scrutinized for communist influence. Those who were willing to name names were able to continue their work in Hollywood. Those who did not were blacklisted and barred from maintaining steady employment. This scare caused suspicions and paranoia to run amuck in the country. People started questioning their associations with friends who had been a part of their lives for many years. In 1951, *The New York Times* published a “tragic-comic quotation by President Truman” that reads “People were afraid to say they believed in the Declaration of Independence” (HUAC).

I admire Miller for having the courage and ingenuity to write such an encompassing tale of terror and panic, especially one that is based on truth in two separate periods in time. That he could tell one story, taking place in historic Salem and at the same time use the overall theme of the play to symbolize the current political actions and tension of his time is truly a sign of genius.

### **Margaret Edson – *Wit***

*Wit* is a story that brings new depth to a dying woman’s bout with cancer. The patient, Vivian Bearing, is a 50-year-old college professor at the University. The hospital has been treating her for ovarian cancer for months, but now she has less than two hours to live. During these last two hours, Vivian takes us on a sparse journey of her life and at the same time gives us a glimpse into the ritualistic treatment patients receive who are undergoing experimental treatment.

Very early on, we realize that Vivian is quite alone. She has no close family that is still living and apparently no close friends. She teaches Seventeenth Century Poetry “specializing in the Holy Sonnets of John Donne” (Edson 7). She finds language and the meaning of language compelling. It has shaped her life. Vivian recounts a story of reading a book to her father. Stumbling upon an unfamiliar word, soporific, she asked him its meaning. When he explained that it meant “sleepy,” she connected that meaning to the picture of sleeping bunnies in her book that had eaten too much lettuce. From that moment forward, words and language were her passion.

During her bouts of receiving treatment, Vivian reminisces about one of her college professors who had made a large impact on her professional life. The woman’s name is E. M. Ashford and she was a demanding and challenging teacher to Vivian. I believe that her example in matters of education led Vivian to acquire those very same traits. Near the beginning of the play, she and Vivian discuss Donne in some detail focusing on his “Holy Sonnet Six” that reads:

“Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not soe.”

Ashford admonishes Vivian to begin with a text and not with a feeling. It is in this manner that Vivian approaches her disease and its treatment - through text and not feeling.

She analyzes every single term. One of her former students, Jason, is even one of her doctors. His approach is also very similar. No feeling, only research and documentation. His impersonal bedside manner, disregarding patient anxiety and apprehension is almost a reflection of Vivian's harsh interaction with her university students. She wanted to deal with their brain, not with their souls. Her hospital experience gives her new insight into humanity and the irreverence with which we treat one another on an everyday basis.

Throughout the story, Vivian is becoming weaker. She throws up horribly several times, retching until it seems her insides will turn inside out. No one comes to visit her. One nurse, who is perceived as an intellectual inferior, is her only link to a warm and caring soul. Susie is the only person in Vivian's small circle of human connection who sees something wrong with the way cancer patients are treated inhumanly. She is the only one who speaks up for Vivian's rights to be treated as a human being, not as a research experiment. When Susie broaches the humanistic side of Jason's work to him, his answer is this: "Listen, if there's one thing we learned in Seventeenth-Century Poetry, it's that you can forget about that sentimental stuff. *Enzyme Kinetics* was more poetic than Bearing's class. Besides, you can't think about that *meaning-of-life* garbage all the time or you'd go nuts" (Edson 61).

The last glimpse of human kindness and understanding that Vivian receives is from her old professor, E. M. Ashford. When Ashford comes to visit her, Vivian does not want to hear anything written by Donne. Instead, her old professor takes out a children's book that she had brought for her great-grandson. Oddly enough, it is also about bunnies. At this point, Vivian is confined to her bed, extremely weak, weeping, and barely hanging on.

After her professor leaves, Jason enters and realizes Vivian is not breathing and her heart is not beating. He begins CPR disregarding Vivian's order to Do Not Resuscitate. It is not until Susie enters and pulls him off her body that Jason realizes his error, but by this time, the code team is in full force. They work on Vivian for a few more minutes until Susie is able to get the order adhered to. Jason is left with the knowledge of what he had been about to do all for the sake of research.

In *Wit*, Margaret Edson has created a new and unique glimpse into the world of cancer patients. She acquired much of the knowledge for this play from working at the National Cancer Institute in Maryland. According to her, the idea for this play just came to her. She is quoted by CNN as saying "you're just writing down the things people say . . . That seems very interesting and natural to me . . . So to write a play you just have to listen" (Allen 327). And it seems she listened to everything going on around her at the institute - from the doctors, to the patients, to the nurses, to the ever-palpable imminence of death among the acutely diseased.



Though she won the Pulitzer Prize for *Wit*, it is the only play she has written to date. She is now a kindergarten teacher in Atlanta, Georgia after much travel and working many different jobs in her lifetime. She was born on July 4, 1961 in Washington, D.C. She went to Smith College where she graduated magna cum laude. Edson traveled to places such as Iowa City, Rome, back to Washington, and on to Maryland before she wrote this play. She has held such jobs as selling hotdogs, bartending, painting the walls of a French convent, clerking on the Aids and cancer ward of the NCI, working at a bike shop, writing an award-winning play, and volunteering as a teacher in D.C. After all these experiences, teaching children to read has become her passion (“Wit” 328).

Edson’s own love of language and words is obvious in her play’s title as well as the dialogue used throughout the play. The American Heritage Dictionary defines “wit” in the following ways: “Perception and understanding; intelligence. **2a** . . . keenness and quickness of . . . discernment. **b**. Sound mental faculties; sanity. **3a**. The ability to perceive and humorously express the relationship between seemingly incongruous things . . .” (“wit”). Edson’s main character exhibits all of these qualities and even vocalizes the use of wit throughout the play. Perhaps the most poignant use of the word is found in the phrase “at wit’s end” which defines simply as “At the limit of one’s mental resources; utterly at a loss” (“wit”).

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

The class will first read each of the three plays. This will involve some in-class reading, out loud and silently. We will also listen to certain scenes from recorded audio. Students will also be expected to read a portion of the scripts for homework. The reading will be intermixed with discussion about the stories and development of questions the students would like answered in the research. I plan to spend only two weeks reading each of the plays. At some point during the unit, we will also watch movies of the plays to see the stories brought to life.

After completing the reading of all three plays, the students will then decide which play and playwright they would like to discuss and study more deeply. After students have numbered their choices, I will divide the class into three groups that represent each playwright. In order to divide the class evenly, some students may end up with their second or third choice. At this point, students are now ready to begin the following projects.

### **Timelines/Newspaper**

Each member of each group will be required to select some social, cultural, political, or personal aspect to research about their chosen playwright. They will become “investigative reporters.” The students will individualize (cheap) Fedora hats and make a “press” tab to stick in the hatband. They will wear these during class to designate their role as reporters as they research information in the library or other resource areas.

Topics for the newspaper can include: a biography on the playwright, a gossip column that may discuss controversial and unproven information that could be circulating about the author, world news that may have affected what the playwright wrote about, an entertainment section that gives information on the first live performance of the chosen play and any reviews that pertain to that performance. The newspaper can also include information that relates to the time period of the author or play such as fashion, music releases, or advertisements for stores or products that would have been featured during that time era.

Students will create a storyboard on a large bulletin board where they can tack up the information they find, organizing it into thematic sections. Each student will then be required to format the information they discover into a newspaper medium, working together to create a visually pleasing end product. The end product will be photocopied and distributed to various classes that can benefit from the information.

### **The Six O' Clock News/ Talk Show**

The next project related to the reading is a performance piece. Using the information gathered from the first lesson, students will need to reformat their research to fit a live medium such as a television newscast or a live talk show. Students will choose characters that they will play to report the news live on-air. Characters can include news anchors, sports reporters, weather persons, reporters reporting live from locations, interviews with civilians, etc...

Groups that choose to portray a live talk show will be expected to have all three playwrights on the show as guests. After gathering information on additional authors from the other two groups, students will have to create a number of questions to ask their "guests" and the ensuing answers to those questions. Students will also need to construct questions and scenarios to be played out by "audience members" in order to create the feel of a live studio audience.

Students will be expected to enhance their programs with the use of costumes, props, and sound effects. The performances should be recorded but also shown to select live audiences in order to enhance the educational value of the project. Some variations of the project are political venues such as programs similar to "Crossfire" or "The O'Reilly Factor." You might want to include soap operas, spoofs, or melodramas as live programming choices as well.

### **Lifelines**

After completing the above projects, I want students to have made the connection of how significant events can affect a person's life and how they view the world. I hope that the students will see how specific experiences triggered the stories that these writers created.

In discovering this, I want students to start charting the significant events in their own lives. They will need to create three graphic organizers that represent the political, the social/cultural, and the personal. The graphic they choose should somehow represent the category they are working on. For instance, if I made a graphic organizer for myself, I might use a fish skeleton because I really like to fish. Then, I would use each of the fish bones to represent a different year on my personal timeline. I would start with my birth, then I might put down the year my dad had a crash causing him to become a quadriplegic. I might also include the year my parents divorced. These are all significant events that occurred in my life that may have helped shape who I am.

There are many political or governmental events that have also occurred during my lifetime. Ronald Reagan was shot, the Challenger exploded, the hostage crisis occurred in Iran, Desert Storm, 9-11, the war on terror, are some examples of significant events. Your students may not be able to list as many events as you, but it's a good activity to get them thinking about the events that have occurred in their lifetime that are related to politics or government and that may come to affect them more later in life. Examples of graphic organizers for this lifeline are the U. S. Flag, the Empire State Building, the Twin Towers, to name a few. Each kid should try to pick something that he/she feels represents his/her own lifetime.

A social or cultural lifeline can be looked at in a couple of different ways. There's the social "entertainment" facet, which highlights important influences in music, media, and fashion. I grew up during the 1980s so you can just imagine the kinds of things that might show up on my lifeline: Madonna, Prince, jam pants, fat shoelaces, the Robot dance move, and high-waisted jeans.

But another view is considering the other levels of culture. How do you identify yourself? By your generation? Gender? Ethnicity? The geographical region you are from? If you are Middle Eastern, did the war on terror have any affect on your every day life? If you are not a citizen of the United States, did the war on terror have any affect on your immigration status? Have you ever been treated differently because of your age? Does your gender (male or female) play a role in how others react to you? These are all subjects that can relate to your cultural lifeline. My cultural lifeline might include a period of time when I lived in the north and people treated me differently because of my southern accent. My reaction was to do my best to lose the accent that had always been a part of my identity. I entered the U. S. military after the Tailhook Scandal occurred which involved the sexual assault and harassment of a female service member by her male counterparts. As a result, sexual harassment was taken very seriously during the time I served in the Navy. That would be a significant event on my cultural lifeline.

The activities outlined above are designed to get students to make connections between everyday events and the stories that can evolve from those experiences. By subsequently examining their own lives, I hope that students will be inspired to take an event that they have experienced and turn it into a play that creatively explores issues important to them.

## LESSON PLANS

### Lesson Plan 1: Making the Newsroom

This lesson will kick off with the students developing creative aspects of a newsroom.

#### *Objectives*

- Students will brainstorm ideas for newspaper sections.
- Students will generate preliminary questions to ask the playwright about how he/she finds topics to write about.

#### *Materials needed*

3x5 Blank index cards  
Scissors  
Glue  
Sequins & beads  
Scrap material  
Masking tape  
Black sharpie  
Plastic fedora hats (\$1.00 at Garden Ridge)  
Old Newspapers

#### *Procedure*

This lesson will begin with a discussion about what it means to be an investigative reporter. Questions to ask might be: What do they investigate? Where do they go to find out information? What is the product of their job? Students will brainstorm a list of ideas and together we will create an outline of expectations.

Discussion will then center on how they can be identified as reporters. I will pass out excerpts of articles that talk about reporters and their hats and then present each student with a plastic fedora and the materials listed above. They will also receive several sheets of old newspaper to place under their materials to protect their desk. Students will be able to individualize their very own hat by creating a hatband and adding other decorative items. Each student will cut a 2x5 piece from one index card and write the word “Press” vertically, in all capital letters, using the black sharpie. They should leave enough blank space at the bottom of the card so that the tab can be stuck in their hatband, but the entire word can still be seen. Students should wear these hats during the class period while researching information relating to their projects.

While working on the fedoras, students should be thinking about what kinds of sections they would like to include in their newspapers. They can use the newspaper sheets on their desks to search for ideas. Each student should write down at least three ideas on the leftover piece of their index card. While finishing their fedora, I will gather these index cards and write each idea on the chalkboard. After the students have finished their hats, the section ideas will be discussed in more depth until finalized.

Once the sections have been finalized, the students will use the masking tape to divide a large bulletin board into the required newspaper sections. This bulletin board will serve as the newspaper storyboard. Each section should be large enough for students to tack up related information as they discover it during their research. To wrap up this lesson, students will brainstorm preliminary questions to ask the playwrights and write them on the chalkboard. Later, I will type the questions up and post them in the appropriate sections of the storyboard.

## **Lesson 2: Gathering Information**

### ***Objectives***

- Students will identify key research words and phrases.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to properly acknowledge sources.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to locate relevant information.

### ***Materials needed***

Hats

Pen/pencil

Reference Sheet

Blank index cards

MLA Citation Worksheets

### ***Procedure***

At the beginning of this lesson, students will assign themselves a section of the newspaper to research. They are eventually expected to write the feature story for the section that they are researching. Using multiple index cards, the kids will, individually, brainstorm key words or phrases that they feel will aid them in their search for information. I will walk around the room checking and assisting the students' work.

After students complete their index cards, I will pass out the Reference Sheet that lists all the types of reference materials the library has available. I will briefly describe each type and what kind of information it might contain, then allow the students time to discuss which materials they feel would be most beneficial to their search and why. They will need to put a star next to the references they plan to use during their trip to the library.

Although the end product is a creative medium and not a research paper, I still want my students to annotate any research they find using the MLA style of citation. Each student will be given several worksheets that list the specific information they need to document for each type of source. For example:

Citing a book w/one author:

1. Name of author \_\_\_\_\_
2. Title of book \_\_\_\_\_

3. Place (usually a city) of publication \_\_\_\_\_
4. Name of publishing company \_\_\_\_\_
5. Date of publication \_\_\_\_\_
6. Page numbers of collected information \_\_\_\_\_

Example of MLA format w/annotation:

Merriweather, Gail. *Miller and His Chums*. New York: Talbot & Grange, 1981.

This book talked about Miller's experiences growing up and anecdotes involving several of his close boyhood friends.

Other worksheets would contain outlines specific to Internet sources, magazine articles, a book with more than one author, newspapers, and reviews. Now that the students have the necessary information, they are ready to proceed to the library, wearing their hats, of course.

Once in the library, students should be able to proceed to specific points of interest or be able to conduct relevant searches on the library's database or Internet. As students come across information they feel is important to their section, they will fill out the MLA worksheets with the required data. They will then write the research information on the worksheet or print/copy the information and staple it to the worksheet. The sources that the students use in the newspaper will be cited at the end of each section. Near the end of the class period, the students will return to the classroom and tack the information they collected in the appropriate section of the storyboard. We will discuss any problems encountered looking up information in the library and then brainstorm solutions to those problems.

### **Lesson 3: It's Showtime!**

#### ***Objectives***

- Students will demonstrate the ability to develop characters.
- Students will demonstrate the ability to create and write dialogue in script format.
- Students will demonstrate creativity in utilizing technical aspects of drama.

#### ***Materials needed***

TV/VCR

20-30 minute tape of the Evening News

Project Guidelines Worksheet

#### ***Procedure***

This lesson will begin with students watching an episode of the evening news (commercials edited out or forwarded through). Before pressing play, I will prep students to watch and take notes on the following: how the show begins, how the stage is set, how transitions are made from one area to another, types of stories presented, length of each feature, clothing worn by news anchors vs. reporters, etc. When the tape finishes

playing, the students will discuss their observations. After the discussion, I will present the students with the following project choices: creation of a news show or talk show, working in their established groups or as a whole class (depending on the size of your class, you may have to predetermine the group vs. whole class decision).

Once the students have made their choice, they must begin working on their performance project immediately. I will pass out the project guidelines and go over them with the class.

### *Project Guidelines*

You must come up with a title for your show.

The performance must be at least 20 minutes long.

Everyone in the group must participate in the performance.

No more than 2 students may sign up for technical crew.

You need to wear costumes during the performance.

You need to acquire all necessary props for the performance.

You need to design a simple, but creative set for your performance.

You need to enhance your performance through the use of lighting and sound.

You need to provide your teacher with a copy of the script.

You must receive teacher approval of your script before the performance takes place.

### *Script Instructions* (should be typed, Times New Roman, 12 font)

- a. On a separate page, provide a list of the characters w/a brief description of each character. Then list the student who is playing that role.
- b. Center the Title of the Performance.
- c. Give a brief description of the setting. (*in italics*)
- d. Type the name of the character speaking in ALL CAPS, followed by a colon: then the spoken dialogue.
- e. Any unspoken direction or descriptions should be typed in *italics*.

At this point, students should be prepared to split into groups and begin developing their characters and scripts. Students should use the information they found in previous lessons to help plan their show. While the students are working, I will move amongst the groups, answering questions and providing any necessary assistance. By the end of the class period, students should have a general idea of how they want to produce their show. Depending on how elaborate the students plan to present their performance, I may allow up to two weeks for rehearsal.

## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Quotes Margaret Edson.
- Corley, Cheryl. "A Raisin in the Sun." 11 Mar. 2002. *National Public Radio*. 9 Feb. 2004. <<http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/raisin>>.  
Provides insight into the life of Lorraine Hansberry and quotes the playwright.
- Edson, Margaret. *Wit*. New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1999.  
One of the plays & playwrights to be studied in class. The last two hours of a woman's life who is dying of cancer.
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- HUAC and the Rise of Anti-Communism*. American Studies. 16 Feb. 2004  
<<http://www.stud.hum.ku.dk/rikkebj/hu.htm>>.  
Provides factual information regarding the "red scare" and how it affected Miller's life.
- Miller, Arthur. *The Crucible*. New York: Penguin Books, 1981.  
One of the plays & playwrights to be studied in class. A group of young girls incite fear that leads to the Salem Witch Hunts of the 1700s.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Why I Wrote The Crucible." Updated 9 Sep. 2003. David Stone. Warren High School. 16 Feb. 2004. <[http://warren.dusd.net/~Resources/11P/M\\_NY.htm](http://warren.dusd.net/~Resources/11P/M_NY.htm)>.  
Provides insight into the playwright's creativity and thought processes.
- Raisin in the Sun: A Chronology*. The Chicago Public Library. 9 Feb. 2004.  
<[www.chipublib.org/003cpl/oboc/raisin/chron.html](http://www.chipublib.org/003cpl/oboc/raisin/chron.html)>.  
Provides a biographical timeline of the events in Lorraine Hansberry's life.
- Schanker, Harry H., and Katharine Anne Ommanney. *The Stage and the School*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, 1999.  
This text has information pertaining to play styles. It also has information regarding several American playwrights.



“Wit.” *Drama for Students*. Eds. David Galens and Lynn Spampinato. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 327-28.

This text offers valuable research and analysis of Edson’s *Wit*. It contains information on characters, plot, theme, and the author’s life.

“wit.” *The American Heritage Dictionary*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1994

Contains specific definitions.

### Supplemental Resources

Czekay, Angelika. “Interview With Wendy Wasserstein.” *The Playwright’s Muse*. Ed. Joan Herrington. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

Students have a chance to see what the author has to say about their work and their lives in an interview situation.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Not Having It All: Wendy Wasserstein’s Uncommon Women.” *The Playwright’s Muse*. Ed. Joan Herrington. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

This excerpt gives insight into Wasserstein’s writing and information regarding her personal life.

Frazier, Ian and Robert Atwan. *The Best American Essays 1997*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997

Good examples of writing creatively.

Hemley, Robin. *Turning Life Into Fiction*. Cincinnati, OH: Story Press, 1994.

An exploration of the process of creatively interweaving fact into fiction.

Herrington, Joan. “A’s Last Memory: Contextualizing Albee’s Three Tall Women.” Ed. Joan Herrington. *The Playwright’s Muse*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

This excerpt gives insight into Albee’s writing and information regarding his personal life.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Birth, Baptism, and Resurrection: August Wilson and the Blues.” *The Playwright’s Muse*. Ed. Joan Herrington. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

This excerpt gives insight into Wilson’s writing and information regarding his personal life.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Interview With August Wilson.” *The Playwright’s Muse*. Ed. Joan Herrington. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

This gives students a chance to see what the author has to say about their work and their lives in an interview situation.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Interview With Edward Albee." *The Playwright's Muse*. Ed. Joan Herrington. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

This gives students a chance to see what the author has to say about their work and their lives in an interview situation.

Jacobus, Lee A. *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997.

This anthology includes many plays that could be used in this study as well as biographical information about the playwrights.

Kitchen, Judith and Mary Paumier Jones. *In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

Good examples of creative writing.

Moffett, James. *Active Voice; A Writing Program Across the Curriculum*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1992.

This book is a good resource to use in order to introduce students to monologue and dialogue styles of writing.

Newman, Leslea. *Writing From The Heart: Inspiration and Exercises for Women Who Want to Write*. Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1993.

This book has excellent warm-up exercises to get students into the practice of writing and thinking up issues that are important to them.

Swain, Dwight V. *Creating Characters; How to Build Story People*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1990.

This book has information that can give students a boost in finding characters and ways in which to write about characters.

### ***Filmography***

*The Crucible*. Dir. Nicholas Hytner. Perf. Daniel Day-Lewis, Winona Ryder. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1996. 124 min.

*A Raisin in the Sun*. Dir. Bill Duke. Perf. Danny Glover, Esther Rolle, Starletta Dupois, Lou Ferguson, John Fiedler, Stephen Henderson, Kimble Joyner, Helen Martin, Joseph C. Phillips. Monterey Home Video, 1989. 173 min.

*Wit*. Dir. Mike Nichols. Perf. Emma Thompson, Christopher Lloyd, Eileen Atkins, Audra McDonald, Harold Pinter, John Woodward. Warner Home Video, 2001. 99 min.