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Theatre History II

Professor Jaher

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Ira Aldridge Lesson Plan

For my final project, I chose to do a lesson plan exploring and analyzing the life of Ira Aldridge. Ira Aldridge was a trailblazer in the theatre community in the 1800's. As an African American man from New York City, he was not accepted as an actor in America. So, he went across the pond to London and started his career as an actor. He became famous for his portrayal of Othello, being the first black man to do so, and thus became known as the "African Roscius". His popularity in Europe allowed him to speak out against racism and slavery in his later life. He was an advocate for human and civil rights and has not been taught as often as he should be in our educational system today.

I felt that Ira Aldridge was an appropriate topic for discussion in high school English and Theatre because he was a point of theatrical history I wish I would have known about in highschool. We worry so much about teaching the dramatic canon, which happens to include primarily white authors and playwrights. The educational system does not often teach about BIPOC artists like Ira Aldridge (with the exception of writers like Toni Morrison and Lorraine Hansberry) and their influence in the world. I think there is a lot to be learned not only about our country but our society as a whole by analyzing the treatment of Ira Aldridge and his life. Despite the fact that Aldridge was born in America, the widespread racism in our country at the time forced him to leave in order to follow his dreams. I find it ironic considering the fact that America has often been labeled with "The American Dream". His experiences in America and in

parts of Europe as an African American actor is exactly why I felt that highschool students should learn about his life and possibly relate his story to modern experiences today. As shown in the play, he was often treated unfairly and faced prejudice and racism during his career.

In the lesson, the students will learn about Ira Aldridge's life and career and the history that is behind the 1800's regarding racism and theatre. Then, the students will read the play, "Red Velvet" by Lolita Chakrabarti. The play is a contemporary play first produced in 2012 in London about the life of Ira Aldridge, his journey into becoming the first African American to portray Othello, and the hardships he experienced during his career. The play is considered historical fiction since most of it was re-imagined by the playwright. Nonetheless, it is a perfect source to better understand Ira Aldridge and it is a good source of analysis for the students to practice their skills in an English Literature environment.

By reading about and analyzing Ira Aldridge's story, students will be able to effectively complete the project I am calling the 'Trailblazer Project'. The Trailblazer project is designed for the end of the lesson after we have learned about and read "Red Velvet". In groups, using what they have learned, students will create a creative project that compares and contrasts Ira Aldridge to another 'Trailblazer' in our modern entertainment industry. In my powerpoint, I provided an example for a 'Trailblazer' with the performer, Alex Newell. Alex Newell is a non-binary Broadway and television performer that is an advocate and representative for the LGBTQ+ community in entertainment. Students will present their project to the class in groups whether that be a powerpoint, a trifold poster, a build-your-own website, or even a video exploration of that person's work. Then, because it is an English class, they will individually write a short paper to go along with their projects to turn in as well.

I figured that this project could be a way that the students could relate this lesson to their personal lives and make connections between theatrical history and our modern society. This lesson is a good exploration of theatrical history, and gives the students a chance to improve their analysis and evaluation skills.

Works Cited

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