

# ASF Study Materials for



*by Trey Ellis and Ricardo Khan*

Directed by  
Ricardo Khan



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### Characters

Chet Simpkins, "125," a young cadet from Harlem

Oscar, an Iowa cadet, a "race man," and married

J. Allen, a cadet from the Bahamas

"W.W.," a cadet from South Side Chicago

Capt. O'Hurley, their white Bostonian training officer

Bomber Pilot Reynolds (this actor also plays an Instructor and Col. Snopes)

Bomber Co-pilot Shaw (this actor also plays the Staff Sergeant, an Instructor, and the Barman)

The Tap Griot, a dancer/storyteller who expresses what cannot be said by the black cadets/pilots

Other voices

**Time:** The present; January 2009; and summer 1943-1945

**Settings:** U.S. Capitol steps, Washington, D.C.; Tuskegee, Alabama; Ramitelli Air Base, southern Italy; and the skies of Europe

Restored P-51 Mustang fighter with "Red Tail" markings of the Tuskegee Airmen's 332nd Fighter Group, specifically Lee Archer's plane. Archer won four aerial victories in Europe.

## Welcome to *FLY*

This is a memory play about history, and a history play about war, and a war play reflecting a fight for integrity and equality at home as well as against foreign political powers. The Tuskegee Airmen, the "Red Tails"—the first black pilots in American military history—were pilots, yes, but also warriors and heroes out of their cockpits.

The characters in *Fly* are fictional and composite, but they represent the experiences of the 2,053 black cadets who sought to live their dream—to fly for the United States Army Air Corps in World War II—and of the 992 who got their wings from the Army's flight training program in Tuskegee, Alabama.

By remembering the challenges met by these men, this play also lets us remember the many challenges African Americans have faced and overcome in our history. The play's opening and closing sequences on January 20, 2009, in Washington, D.C. show the Tuskegee Airmen witnessing the inauguration of Barack Obama as President—after witnessing and making so much American history themselves.

In keeping with its subject, the authors use the African American tradition of the griot storyteller/dancer to provide the larger context of history as well as to express in tap what these men could not say aloud in the society of their time. Thus, the play lets us be there inside and out with one of the most exciting opportunities of World War II, the success of the Tuskegee Airmen.



Two Tuskegee Airmen look to the skies

"I'm just realizing now, after all these years, after all those battles waged and only sometimes won, that history is the river we stand in."

—Chet at the opening

### About These Study Materials

These materials provide basic information that can be adapted to any grade level and skill set. They contain:

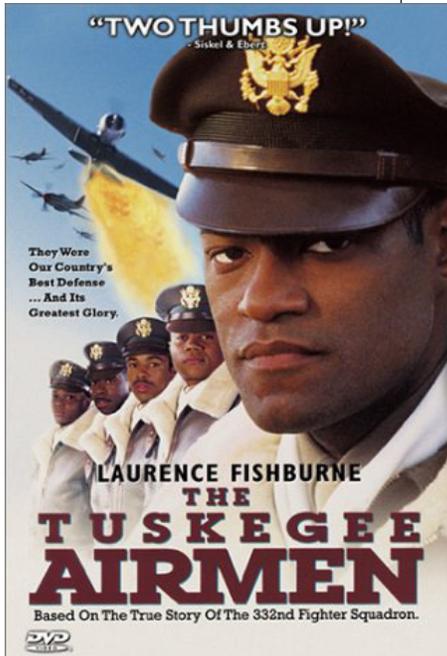
- historical background information
- literary analysis of structural conflict and character
- analysis of issues and imagery
- activities for discussing or researching the subject plus pre- or post-show prompts (in blue boxes)
- a worksheet for analyzing the play and production



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### The Story of This Play

Four young black men test their skills and face down social and Army Air Corps prejudice to become the first black pilots in the American military, serving skillfully in the European theatre of war in World War II.



Trey Ellis was one of the screenwriters for the HBO television movie *The Tuskegee Airmen*, first aired in 1995. The movie starred Laurence Fishburne and Cuba Gooding, Jr.

## The Makers and Making of the Play *FLY*

### The Authors' Earlier Projects

Trey Ellis and Ricardo Khan each came to this play after working on other projects about the Tuskegee Airmen. Even when they collaborated on this project, it took several forms before achieving the final version that you will see.

Ricardo Khan was co-founder and artistic director at the major African American theatre Crossroads in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Stunned by a picture of the airmen at a friend's house, he produced the play *Black Eagles* about the Airmen for a Crossroads production in 1989.

For his part, Trey Ellis, a writer of novels, screenplays, and plays as well as a professor of film at Columbia University, was part of the screenwriting team for the HBO television film *The Tuskegee Airmen* (1995).

Though the subject of the Airmen was powerful, reviewer Anita Gates of the *New York Times* forthrightly said of the earlier film, "It's possible to make a piece of sentimental claptrap about them," but in writing *Fly* (2009), she praised Ellis, "he's come a long way since [the film]," calling the current play "a superior piece of theatrical synergy."

### Developing *Fly*

The men began collaborating to produce a play commissioned by the Lincoln Center Institute (its educational wing) in 2005 during Khan's stint as artist-in-residence there. It was an hour-long piece produced and performed predominantly for students and later had theatre productions in 2007 and 2008. The 90-minute version was performed in Massachusetts in June 2009, with the final version having its premiere at Crossroads Theatre in November 2009. This is the version ASF is producing.



The major catalyst for revising this memory play about history was the election of Barack Obama as President in late 2008 and his inviting the Tuskegee Airmen to his Inauguration. Ellis and Khan knew this was the element the play needed to complete its arc and cap its issues. So they rewrote both the play's opening and closing, tweaking other moments as well.

The film had enjoyed the initial instigation and executive producer expertise of Tuskegee Airman Capt. Robert W. Williams. In a wink to that experience, Oscar in the play hails from the same home town in Iowa as Williams. For the Crossroads premiere, they also had a former Tuskegee Airman, Dr. Roscoe C. Brown, as advisor (and Chet becomes a "Doctor," that is, a professor). Brown's contributions were vital not only for matters of fact and perspective, but as he embraced the storytelling technique, he made several creative suggestions such as using war footage in the production.

In addition to its material, the very theatricality of *Fly* is its major asset. Ellis and Khan leave filmic realism behind and fully embrace the imaginative possibilities of the stage. They include more black roots of storytelling and cultural history with the griot/dancer character. Physical storytelling, cultural storytelling, visual elements, a strong, tight script all help to make *Fly* an airborne experience you won't forget.



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*Participants in history—  
Tuskegee Airmen at a briefing  
in Europe during World War II*

#### How the Tuskegee Airmen Integrated the U.S. Military

- **1941-45:** During World War II the Tuskegee Airmen served in segregated units, as did all blacks then in the military.
- **1947:** The Army Air Corps becomes the U.S. Air Force, a separate branch of the military. The 332nd Fighter Group is reconstituted out of the 477th Composite Group, into which it was combined at the end of the war. Those were the only two groups in which blacks could serve, although the Air Force began planning for integration to fulfill manpower needs and give opportunities to all.
- **1948:** President Harry Truman signs Executive Order 9981, which essentially ended racial segregation in the military, an act that led to further integration in the U.S.
- **1949:** The Air Force begins assigning 332nd forces to previously all-white units, the first branch to integrate.

## The Memory Framework of the Play

"Man, what I would have given for my cool cat buddies to have been there, too."

—Chet, in the opening

History is something many of us study and most of us live in without having our names recorded. As Chet says early in the play recalling his changing sense of history through his life, "history is the river we stand in."

This play starts with history and memory, and for us it is more history than memory since few of us now have a direct link to World War II. But the Tuskegee Airmen made history in World War II, and the difference they made in

the air and later by their presence in integrating the U.S. Air Force, the first branch of the military to integrate, still lives today. They are history. They made history—and memories.

*Fly* puts the Tuskegee "Experiment" (as it was then called by the Army Air Corps) in context of the larger black experience in America. Even before we meet Chet, our focal character for the memories, we get images of the Middle Passage, the auction block, Jim Crow conditions, and the civil rights movement—the long road to equality. Then the play jumps to January 20, 2009, an equal opportunity achieved with the inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the United States. Achieving social equality is a large part of *Fly*, because it has been a large part of many Americans' experience.

Chet starts by remembering one day, hearing voices around him, especially "You paved the way, sir!" and "How do you feel, Dr. Simpkins?" The answer to that question is the play we experience, from his fascination with history as a boy playing *Musketeers* on a street in Harlem to wishing his war buddies could see this day. They don't, but we then see them and what they did as he remembers.



*President George W. Bush awarded  
the group of Tuskegee Airmen the  
Congressional Medal of Honor in 2007*



*Participating witnesses to history—  
incoming President Barack Obama invited the  
Tuskegee Airmen to attend his Inauguration on  
January 20, 2009, an event remembered in the  
play along with their own service to America.*



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### Historical Context

Access the Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. website @:  
[www.tuskegeearmen.org](http://www.tuskegeearmen.org)  
 The entire 1925 document quoted is available @:  
<http://tuskegeearmen.org/wp-content/uploads/Negro-Manpower-In-War.pdf>



A World War II war bonds poster featuring a Tuskegee airman

### Activities: For Discussion

- Examine the generalizations in point #2. How many of them are open to rebuttal, contextual analysis, and historical commentary? How many of them are prejudicial? How does that view affect our sense of the rest of the statements made here?
- Point #4 reiterates "exactly the same" qualifications and standards for blacks and whites. How does "given tasks he may reasonably be expected to perform" fit with those claims? Whose "expectations" matter?

## The History Behind the Airmen: 1920s

### The Military View in 1925

TuskegeeAirmen, Inc. is the organization for documented Tuskegee airmen—that is, everyone who was trained or involved in training for any U.S. Army Air Corps position at Tuskegee Army Air Field between 1942 and 1949. On the organization's excellent website is [an Army document from 1925](#). It was written at the Army War College in Montgomery, Alabama, and stamped

"SECRET," now covered by black marker. It is titled "[Notes on proposed plan for use of negro manpower](#)" [sic] and signed by the base commandant in 1925.

This document is a history lesson in racial views of the 1920s and is important but not pleasant reading. It is a frank mixture of prejudice and an effort at practical military evenhandedness. Look at the first four points listed:

Notes on proposed plan for use of negro manpower.  
 (Not a part of the plan.)

1. The fundamental conception upon which this plan is based is that the military man power of the United States, white or black, should be assigned to duties in the Army for which it is qualified. Military considerations alone should govern in war.
2. The negro does not perform his share of civil duties in time of peace in proportion to his population. He has no leaders in industrial or commercial life. He takes no part in government. Compared to the white man he is admittedly of inferior mentality. He is inherently weak in character.
3. The negro issue should be met squarely. The War Department had no pre-determined and sound plan for the use of negro troops at the beginning of the World War. It had no adequate defense against political and racial pressure and was forced to organize negro combat divisions and commission unqualified negro officers. The results are well known.
4. The War Department when occasion demands should be able to present this matter frankly to those who make demands or should know the facts. The negro, particularly the officer, failed in the World War. The door will not be closed against him on this account. He will be given an opportunity to take part in war in accordance with his qualifications in exactly the same fields of activity as are allotted the white man. He will be accepted for service by the identical standards applied to the white man. While in the service he will be measured by the standards applied to the white man. This includes reclassification, elimination, and rewards of promotion and decoration. He will be given a sound plan of organization, training and leadership. He will be given tasks he may reasonably be expected to perform. If he makes good he will have the opportunity eventually to fight in the war with all-negro organizations. If he fails to qualify to fight as a race he will be limited to such tasks as he can perform under white leadership. What he accomplishes in war will depend upon the negro.
5. There should be no sentiment about the use of negro troops in war. It is not sound to contend that he should bear losses in war in proportion to his population relative to white population. The basis of his employment in war should be that applied to white soldiers, viz., qualifications and capabilities for military service.

### Analyzing the Play

- Do we see the same kind of official Army "exactly the same" attitude mixed with obvious prejudice in any characters in the play? Are things

"exactly the same"? Cite examples.

How do the black characters react and respond to this set of assumptions in the organization they have joined and in which they seek to excel?



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### Historical Context

"If I can dream it,  
I can be it."

—W.W.

### Dig Into the History!

- See "Tuskegee Airmen Questions and Answers" written by Daniel L. Haulman, Chief of the Organizational Histories Branch of the Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama. It is the source for information on this and other pages and can be accessed @: [http://tuskegeearmen.org/wp-content/uploads/Tuskegee-Airmen-Questions-and-Answers-09\\_2014.pdf](http://tuskegeearmen.org/wp-content/uploads/Tuskegee-Airmen-Questions-and-Answers-09_2014.pdf)



One of the 1942 Tuskegee Airmen classes  
(from Riverside archive)

## The History of the Airmen: 1930s and 1940s

### Origins of the Tuskegee "Experiment"

- The Tuskegee Airmen, Inc. now calls it the Tuskegee Experience, but in the 1940s, the Army called it the Tuskegee "Experiment," showing the Army's uncertain attitude to outcomes.

- The Tuskegee program grew out of several federal programs mandated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Congress:

— in **1938**, Roosevelt mandated an experimental civilian pilot training program to begin in 1939, offering 330 openings at 13 colleges (none black). Congress made the program permanent in **June 1939**, with the provision that no one be excluded on the basis of race (Rep. Everett Dirksen's addition). Six black colleges joined the group, and a few black CPT students attended white schools.

— The Selective Service and Training Service Act of **1940** set up the first U.S. peace-time draft, requiring all American males aged 21 to 35 to register for the draft. It stipulated

that within determined quotas, "any person regardless of race or color ... shall be afforded an opportunity to volunteer for induction" and that "in the selection and training of men under this Act ... there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color."

- In **1940** the Civil Aeronautics Authority and the Army developed "colored personnel" for aviation service, which allowed blacks to train as pilots and support personnel. FDR campaigned for his third term in **1940** promising that blacks could become military pilots, though to be trained and to serve in segregated units.

- Tuskegee was chosen as the training site because it had an extant black civilian pilot training program through Tuskegee Institute at Moton Field, Tuskegee sought the contract for the Army training site, the region had more days of good flying weather than elsewhere, and the area already had a segregated environment, since the training would be segregated.

### The Squadron(s)

- The first black flying unit in American military history was the 99th Pursuit Squadron, later called the 99th Fighter Squadron, activated in **March 1941** with no pilots yet available. The first class of 13 cadets at Tuskegee began training in the fall of 1941; five cadets graduated in **March 1942**, one of them a West Point graduate, Capt. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Later three more black squadrons, the 100th, 301st, and 302nd, joined the 99th, forming the 322nd Fighter Group, the first black fighter group.

- Overall, 44 classes of pilots trained at Tuskegee, graduating 930 pilots plus 51 liaison and service pilots out of 2053 cadets who entered training. The "washout" rate was 51+%. Training in primary, basic, and advanced phases took a total of six months (three 9-week courses) and there was prior pre-flight training.

- The Army Air Corps deployed 355 Tuskegee Airmen pilots overseas for combat starting in 1943; these pilots flew 1491 combat missions between 1943 and 1945. They began regular engagement with enemy aircraft in combat in June, 1944, when they began bomber escort missions. Their bomber-loss rate was half the Air Corps average and occurred on only 7 of their 179 escort missions.



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### Historical Context



A sergeant in the control tower,  
Ramitelli Airfield, Italy

#### • Were all the Tuskegee Airmen pilots?

No, the program was designed to train pilots, navigators, radio operators, support staff, instructors, and all the technical support personnel to keep the planes flying. Part of this was, of course, to keep the Group segregated. Tuskegee Airmen Inc. today calls anyone involved with the Tuskegee "experience," black or white, male or female, a Tuskegee Airman.

## FLY: Get the Facts to Join the Fighter Group

#### • Why do the planes of the 322nd Fighter Group have red tails, so the unit is called "Red Tails"?

In June 1944 the 332nd Fighter Group (the Tuskegee Airmen—the 99th, which had been in Europe since April 1943, the 100th, 301st, and 302nd Fighter Squadrons) transferred from the 12th Air Force in Europe, a tactical force supporting surface forces, to the 15th Air Force, a strategic force which flew heavy bombers under fighter escort deep into enemy territory. The 15th Air Force had 84 bombardment squadrons and 22 fighter escort squadrons based at Ramatelli Airfield in Italy. The 322nd, the only black unit in this force, was one of the four fighter escort groups, each group identified by its tail color pattern—the 31st striped red, the 52nd solid yellow, the 325th black/yellow checks, and the 322nd solid red.

#### • How many missions did the Tuskegee Airmen fly in Europe?

The 99th Squadron (deployed to Europe a year earlier than the rest), flew 577 missions with the 12th Air Force before joining the 322nd, where the Group flew 914 more missions for 1491 missions total, 312 of which were for the 15th Air Force from June 1944 to April 1945, and 179 of those were bomber escort missions, mostly with heavy bombers (4-engine B-17s or B-24s).

#### • What aircraft did the 322nd fly?

The 99th flew P-40s (an aircraft inferior to most other fighters, but all units in the 12th Force flew them) until they joined the 322nd, at which time all four squadrons flew P-51s. The other 322nd squadrons had flown P-39s, then P-47s, until they got the P-51s. The P-51 could fly faster and farther than the earlier fighters, but it was not faster than German jets, and its engine was more vulnerable to enemy fire than the P-47's.

#### • "Kills" are the kind of competitive statistic pilots keep, but what is the overall sense of the 322nd's service in Europe?

The 322nd had 112 kills. Three Tuskegee Airmen had 4 kills each, one away from "ace" status (for which one needs 5 kills). Four of the Airmen shot down three enemy planes each in one day. Considering that they were in escort duty for only a year of the war and ordered not to chase a non-threatening enemy plane, and that they served at the end of the war when the Germans flew fewer defensive flights, they did remarkably well.

Other statistics are also important. The 322nd lost bombers to enemy fire on only 7 of its 179 escort missions for a total of 27 lost bombers in all. Other fighter squadrons lost an average of 46 bombers.

Of the 355 Tuskegee Airmen who served in Europe, 81 did not return, though some of these died in accidents. Airmen who became POWs when shot down over enemy territory totaled 31. The Tuskegee Airmen earned a total of 96 Distinguished Flying Crosses, and their units won three Distinguished Unit Citations during the war.



A P-51 Mustang —with a  
"Tuskegee" red tail



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### Historical Context

#### The Tap Tradition

- In the hugely popular Irish song and dance show, *Riverdance*, one show-stopping number is the tap-off between Irish dancers and black American tap dancers. The Irish tap style is quick stepping with torso rigid; the black American tap dancer's style is ever changing, jazzy, fluid, showy, and dazzling. Hard not to love that dazzle. Check out <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5OiGQOZWic> on YouTube.
- Like ballet and modern dance, the tap tradition is intricately expressive, but to the movement/visual element it adds its own percussive sound, and that's a dynamic duo. The "music" is part of the art itself; we can *hear* the dance. If someone in your class taps, have a show-and-tell to explore the aural possibilities. What could those sounds along with a dancer's body express?

## The Griot Storytelling Tradition

### The Griot

The African storytelling tradition is performance art—a strong sense of history and tradition, words, music, and dance fuse to express events and character, feeling and purpose. A powerful and poetic mode of narration, it is improvisationally sensitive to its audience, rooted in age-old wisdom, and filled with vibrant imagery.

In *Fly*, the authors include this long-lived African tradition as part of the unbroken heritage of African Americans, kidnapped from their native lands and cultures and forced into a new land, enslaved in another culture, but their own cultures still survived, adapted, and permeated their new lives. This is a story about black cadets becoming pilots in a largely white Army and making their way in what was then a largely white social power structure—and here their story is told their way.

In this version of the griot tradition, the authors literally "tap into" their roots because the griot uses tap dance far more than words as his expressive medium. Given the daily social, racial, and military pressures on the cadets, they often cannot afford to say what they feel, so their emotions emerge through the tap griot's dance—he flies, he "screams," he locomotes, he mourns, he removes, he remembers. He also speaks, but rarely. His feet "speak" for the men, just as the cadets' deeds must speak for them in this "experiment"/experience which functions as a microcosm of the black experience in America.

### Popular Music and Dance in *Fly*

The men also have their own dance traditions to explore in the show. Faced with a world that is repeatedly "others" and not yet fully willing to be a collective "ours," the men access their own musical and dance roots in times of need. Black popular music by Bessie Smith or Duke Ellington plays a significant emotional role for the cadets in the play. In fact, Bessie Smith becomes a protest singer as they select her song on the juke box of the local shop when they cannot go in the front door of a club (a privilege that was guaranteed on military bases, except when it wasn't).

They also use their own dance tradition when they want to pull together, sensing that someone may be stalking them from the woods. Do they make a mad run for the base? No, indeed! They "step" home, using Oscar and W.W.'s college fraternity experience to move as one in style. They maneuver the challenges and find their own inner responses, ones that build morale and validate them in the face of those who do not.

### Post-Show Activities

- Discuss the role of the tap griot and his "role" in the storytelling of the play. Would the play be the same without him? What does he offer?
- Discuss the role of the cadets' own music and dance choices. For instance, look at how music and dance help them respond to being "back doored" at the club. Their hurt turns into their own affirmation. How does Bessie Smith help them do that? How does the ensemble Stepping help them do that in contrast to their previous military drill? How are those choices character choices for the men? Is Stepping like flying in formation?
- Why is "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree" the perfect song for the Berlin choice moment?





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Analyzing the Play

**Things to Watch For and Consider in the Tuskegee Scenes**

- What do we learn about each cadet as he travels to Tuskegee, and how do we judge his arc of character from that point? Does he change or develop? How and why, if so?
- What group dynamics threaten the success of the men? What group dynamics aid the success of the men? How do they address and solve problems? Are they proactive? Are they savvy?
- How does Capt. O'Hurley "play" the men against each other and use the system? How do his racial views get expressed? How does he use his power? Why? Does he use racial slurs as a tactic or as "social truth" as he sees it?
- What do we learn in the training scenes? in the classroom? in the plane? What do we learn in the bunkhouse scenes or the on-leave scenes? Compare the stresses and dynamics.
- If the men succeed, why do they succeed? Can we tell?

**FLY: Fighting to Fly—The Action of the Play/ 1**

**Conflict**

Drama means conflict, and *Fly* offers conflict on every level:

**Internal**—Every cadet has his own loves and losses, his own needs and hopes, his own memories and family, his own idea of success. In a competitive situation where they are told most cadets won't make it, each is determined, is obsessed, with being the one who flies and will show the others that's true.

**Among the cadets**—Every cadet has "been a colored man all his life," as one says when someone expects fairness. Part of their success means individual superiority, but part depends on functioning as a unit, as one. Finding the unity—not just the faceless military march but unity—is its own battle, given the personalities and ambitions involved.

**Within the "system"/ Army and society**—Every cadet has fought racism to get to this moment, to have this opportunity. Do their different roads—two college grads, two working men, all street savvy and unwilling to bend—make the challenges any less daunting or the confrontations less damaging?

**Character**

Character also matters in a play, and in a play such as *Fly*, the character's character, what he's made of, is doubly important.

**Chet**—the one who anchors the story, which we experience through his memories. He is the youngest, and the least educated, but he's the only licensed pilot in the group when they start. He already knows some things the others don't, but they know much more than he about life.

**Oscar**—the natural leader, the "race man," the one who thinks strategically and realizes when they're being played, how the Army "game" works, and where they're vulnerable. He's got a family of his own, a baby on the way, and wants this success to mean something for his people; he knows he's carrying their hopes, too.

**W.W.**—the Chicago street guy who can play all the edges, who put himself through college running a numbers game, but who dreams big and means to have those dreams come true.

**J. Allen**—the foreigner, not just racially different from much of the Army, but also a black British citizen from the Bahamas. [In history, there were 5 foreign Tuskegee cadets, all from Haiti, and all returned to Haiti after training.] His opportunity is also his father's opportunity, so he's also a "family man," bearing the weight of a son who must make good for all.

Conflicts? Oscar and W.W. both assume leadership, and Captain O'Hurley knows just how to play that to test the group to the limits. J. Allen will mix it up just as quickly as W.W. or Oscar. Chet has good sense and seems guileless, but every cadet has more to him than the surface shows. Can one of these men succeed at Tuskegee? Can all of them succeed? Can the system, or the play, let that happen?



The "Spirit of Tuskegee," the P.T. Stearman biplane used for basic Army Air Corps training at Tuskegee.



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Analyzing the Play



Patch of the 99th, and below the 100th, Fighter Squadrons of the Tuskegee Airmen

### The Berlin Mission

The Tuskegee Airmen's longest and most memorable bomber escort mission was on **March 24, 1945**. The bombing mission was to Berlin itself, a first for the 15th Air Force, focused on the Daimler-Benz tank assembly plant. For its service that day on the successful mission, the 332nd won a Distinguished Unit Citation. (The 99th Fighter Group had already won two such citations before joining the 332nd.) This bombing mission is the climax of the play's European section, involving personal, racial, and enemy actions and resolutions.



## **FLY: Flying to Fight—The Action of the Play/ 2**

### In the Cockpit over Europe

Three of our four cadets earn their wings and man their cockpits over the skies of Europe in the war. They are skilled pilots, and this is what they trained for, but dogfights with German jets are not the stuff of textbooks. Watching them do their jobs as a team, one to a fighter plane, having each other's backs and cheering each other on, shows how camaraderie grows into brotherhood and into a squadron.

In the war scenes the racial dynamics change, in fact, they reverse—the lives of the white bomber pilots largely depend on the skill of their accompanying fighter pilots, some of whom are black. O'Hurley ran roughshod over the cadets, but what happens when a bomber pilot uses a slur, perhaps not even thinking about it? Thousands of feet in the air going hundreds of miles an hour carrying a payload of thousands of pounds of bombs, can you afford to stigmatize your protection with German fighters on the way? Watching Oscar straighten out Shaw and Shaw's eventual reaction develops the twists of the story one more turn.

So there is still white/black tension to deal with, even in the same Army, even in the skies of Europe, but there is also that new common enemy. The action quickens in the European scenes, since dogfights are fast and furious sequences.

### Flying with the Real Tuskegee Airmen at War

The 99th Flight Squadfon deployed to North Africa in April 1943 and then moved to southern Italy. The other three Tuskegee Airmen squadrons, the 100th, the 301st, and 302nd, stayed in the U.S. for more training at Selfridge Field, Michigan, outside of Detroit—where there were race riots in 1943 and where the base officer's club was segregated despite Army regulations to the contrary. The 332nd Fighter Group added the 99th Squadron in 1944 and began running heavy bomber escort missions in P-51 Mustangs, which were faster than other planes they'd flown but not faster than German jets.

The 332nd Fighter Group pilots, under orders from their commander, Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., did not chase enemy airplanes that were no longer threatening the bombers they were assigned to protect. As a result, the Group had fewer enemy "kills" than other squadrons who left their escort duties to chase German planes. You will see this behavior in the play when the Germans are not pursued once they are chased away. That's historically accurate.



The Tuskegee Airmen in action; picture those tails red.



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### Analyzing the Play

"The sky doesn't let you take your troubles up here with you."

—Chet, while flying

### Direct Address

Chet opens the play with direct address to the audience and continues occasional comments about this memory. All four cadets briefly introduce themselves to us directly, and at the end of his first scene, Capt. O'Hurley takes a moment for direct address as well, giving us his view of the "experiment." Why is this technique used early in the play? What is its effect?



**Col. Benjamin O. King, Jr.** a graduate of West Point and member of the first class of Tuskegee Airmen. He went on to command the 99th Flight Squadron and later the entire 322nd Flight Group. Son of the Army's first black general, he himself became the first black general in the new Air Force.

## Analyzing Issues and Imagery in the Play/ Names

### Names (Given Names/ Name-Calling)

- From the cast list on, names are a major element of this play. Only one character is listed with a first and last name (see p. 1), and the first reference to Chet is as "Dr. Simpkins." The other black characters introduce themselves by their **first names** and are so listed. During the action we eventually hear all their last names once. The white characters have only **last names** and we never learn their first names. Identity and status become an ongoing issue for the black men.
- As they arrive in Tuskegee the cadets use first names and introduce themselves to each other and, via direct address, to us. They are individuals.

To Capt. O'Hurley [Irish, if names are indicative] they are a "herd," a "batch," but certainly not part of "we real aviators" as he is, nor are they likely to be since instead of greeting them he proudly states his high wash-out rate before landing the n-word on them. The issues are very clear by the end of scene 2.

The men begin **nicknaming** each other immediately. Oscar calls the Bahamian J. Allen "Coconut" when he tries to claim the front bunk, and we've already heard the cadets use "son," "boy" (for Chet, who is obviously young), "pops" in the first scene. Now we learn their home towns, more identity.

- Yet when Chet, Oscar, W.W., and J. Allen arrive at class, Capt. O'Hurley calls all four cadets "**George.**" At first, Chet assumes it's a mistake and clarifies, "Uh, name's Simpkins, Chester, sir." But the next question goes to "some other George," and we realize as they do this is a slur for Pullman porter, servant, not "one of us," since pilots consider

themselves the aristocrats of the military. O'Hurley's attitude is clear; the "experiment" is useless. The cadets cannot name a single German airplane when O'Hurley shows them slides, so they, too, have more names to learn, more "identities" to perceive.

- On their first training flight, O'Hurley calls for "next George" and then "last George," to which Chet again responds, "It's Chester, sir."
  - Soon all four cadets can name every German plane they're shown, and O'Hurley shows he knows some names, too, as he names Willis (W.W.) cadet leader—not Oscar, the group's natural leader. The two cadets fight, and on re-entry O'Hurley calls them both by **their last names**. Names are a tactic, a weapon in O'Hurley's training, and we also learn the final last name from his mouth, J. Allen's, as O'Hurley washes him out.
  - Once in Europe, the Tuskegee Airmen identify themselves without names; at the midair rendezvous, they remove their oxygen masks and salute the white bomber pilots, seemingly back to black/white social/Army stereotypes again. Of course, they indulge in stereotypes for the German pilots, calling them "Heinrich" [a version of the "George" used for them].
- But the play develops the name issue here. When the white pilots call on the 99th pilots, the men give Oscar's full name and personal information—he becomes a complete person to the two bomber pilots. Later in a personal radio exchange in the air, W.W. and Shaw use each other's names in the most deeply revealing moment we get from a white character in the play as Shaw, with an apology, acknowledges his fate is in W.W.'s hands.

Moreover, all the black pilots make the name Tuskegee Airmen a term of pride for all time.



by Trey Ellis and Ricardo Khan

### Analyzing the Play



Army Air Corps pilot's wings

#### Activity: The Image of War

- The World War II section of the play offers intense action of airborne missions, being under constant attack, trying to survive while protecting other planes and their payloads, always keeping the objective in mind. Take that familiar imagery and analyze the action in the Tuskegee section of the play in those terms—what is the cadets' "objective"? Where are the "attacks" coming from? Why? From how many sides and sources? What are the men trying to protect and what is the valuable payload? What does "winning" mean in this context? How far does the analogy go? Is the bomber pilots' first impression any different than O'Hurley's attitude?
- How ironic is it that Capt. O'Hurley, if Irish, is himself from a group that endured severe prejudice and stigma when they came to America in mass emigration during the 19th-century Potato Famine? Is that perhaps an intentional part of the play's commentary?

## Analyzing Issues and Imagery/ Fighting Two Wars

In World War II, the U.S. fought the Japanese and the Allies (England, France, America, Canada, et al.) fought the Italians and especially the German Nazis, a government that proclaimed the perfection of the Aryan race and that stigmatized and sought to obliterate Jews, gays, gypsies, and other groups it considered inferior.

This play quietly examines the irony of that conflict, unquestionably seen as heroic on the Allies' part, when America was at that time still itself a segregated society that viewed many groups, especially blacks, as inferior. Capt. O'Hurley, in his one direct address that releases his inner frustration at having to train black pilots, directly addresses this point and analogy: "It's ... it's like I'm a traitor, fighting for the other side. Helping the damn Nazis tear down everything that makes this country great" (sc. 4). Later in the play, on the flight to Berlin, the play balances the moment with bomber pilot Shaw's self-aware response, "I don't deserve your air cover...."



All the black cadets have been on the receiving end of prejudice long before joining the Army Air Corps, and when back with the others, Oscar tells W.W., in response to Capt. O'Hurley's racism, "I don't want it for free, Chicago. I just want it fair." W.W. replies, "You colored, right? Been colored your entire natural life?"—in other words, since when has anything been fair for us. And Oscar admits he signed up for flight training "'cause they say I can't. It messes with their head."

*Above: The Distinguished Flying Cross, several times won by Tuskegee Airmen*

The battle during training is O'Hurley's determination to wash out most of the cadets and their determination to make the grade and become pilots. In other words, it is the specific instance, the microcosm, of the larger society's attitude and system, the macrocosm of prejudice. O'Hurley's tactics are power plays, racist digs, and divide and conquer, always trying to undermine their strength.

Their natural leader is Oscar, who understands the captain's divisive purpose and its goal. He knows why W.W. is named cadet leader; again it's to breed divisiveness and failure. He forces W.W. to admit it and explain it to the others: "Why'd he pick you, Chicago? Tell them!" Finally W.W. says, "Esprit de corps ... 'The spirit of the group.' O'Hurley knows that if it's destroyed, he wins. So he picked me." In other words, he thinks I'll help destroy the group.

Yet Oscar never stops working for their group success, and even when half their cadet cohort has been washed out—"Good flyers too. Just for looking at somebody crossways," Oscar tells his wife in a phone call—our four cadets are still there to take the final inflight test before graduation. They've met with Army prejudice, local Alabama prejudice when on leave (told to use the back door of the club), and overcome their own competitive temperaments to fly as a group.

The squadron flies with team spirit in Europe, watching out for each other and, when on escort duty, especially watching out for the bombers, the "heavies," they are to protect. They always have each other's back, their "6"—pilots use a horizontal numbered clock face as a reference to communicate direction quickly, so if a plane is coming up behind you, it's on your "6." You'll hear the pilots use such references several times in the play's European scenes.



by Trey Ellis and Ricardo Khan

#### POST-SHOW Activity:

##### Staging *Fly*

- We imagine the airplanes in *Fly*. Unlike a film, the theatre engages the imagination to complete the story. How do the actors and the tap griot help you feel the flight? Do you *need* to see an actual airplane? Might your imagining flight actually fit into the story being told? How?
- Assess what role music/dance play in the production. Are they a crucial choice? How do they help tell the story? How well?



#### Some Lines to Analyze

- *Chet*: "We were so young, you see. The world was so young. We used to tell ourselves, it wasn't a matter of whether things would change, but *when*."
- *J. Allen*: "Dogs beg. Men don't. I am a man. I am not a dog."
- *O'Hurley*: "This isn't the *Wizard of Oz*. Never has been and never will be a flying monkey."
- *Col. Snopes*: "We not only have a war to win, but a world to save."
- *Oscar*: "This is my favorite part of the whole war." *[taking off oxygen mask to salute white bomber pilots]*

## Pre- and Post-Show Activities

### PRE-SHOW Activities

#### History

- The Media Kit on the Tuskegee Airmen Inc. website offers a brief history of the Tuskegee Airmen program, a page of statistics, and a page of accomplishments, a ready reference for basic historical knowledge and awareness of the subject of the play. You may want to put it on a bulletin board or copy it for your students to pique their curiosity with facts about the actual Tuskegee Airmen—or share the historical page(s) in these materials.
- The play introduces the Tuskegee Airmen in context of the larger black experience in America—the Middle Passage, slavery, the Jim Crow South, the Civil Rights movement, Inauguration Day 2009. Have groups explore each of these topics, finding some statistics and details so they are more meaningful experiences than just labels when they meet them in the play.
- Tuskegee's fame in the 1940s now rests on two very different activities: the U.S. Army Air Corps's training of the Tuskegee Airmen and the government's Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Research more details about each of these activities and the attitudes toward and treatment of the men involved.
- Look up the statistics on the P-51 Mustang, flown by the Tuskegee Airmen in the 1945 Berlin mission (and all their 1944-45 missions), and on the German M3-262 jet, which attacked them. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each airplane? What could the Tuskegee Airmen use in an air fight?

### Training Lingo

- On their final flight test, the cadets are asked to complete a series of synchronized maneuvers. Look up these terms if you want to appreciate what each maneuver entails in an actual airplane:
    - a split S
    - an Immelman
    - a barrel roll
    - Chandelle
    - rolling scissors to a snap roll
    - a Hammerhead
- Why would these maneuvers be useful to a fighter pilot? Which ones put the most G-force on a pilot? Why?

### PRE- or POST-SHOW Activities

#### Analyzing Situations

- If you are trying to master a complicated set of new skills and the instructor or boss puts you down, how do you handle the situation when he has power to promote or drop you?
- When is assertiveness/machismo an asset in a gutsy endeavor and when is it a liability? How do racism and assertiveness/machismo mix? How would racism work in a hierarchical institution such as the U. S. Army? If your officer is racist and you are a different race than the officer, how can you address the situation?
- Prejudice is an issue in the play.
  - Compare Capt. O'Hurley's attitude to the bomber pilots'. Any change?
  - What was racial prejudice like in the 1940s? If possible, interview a senior citizen who experienced the 1940s to get facts on this topic and to compare then to now in his or her view. Write up the report of your interview for the group or class.
- Compare/contrast how Chet, Oscar, W.W., and J. Allen each respond to their situation in training or in Europe.



by Trey Ellis and Ricardo Khan

## Worksheet for ASF's Production of *FLY*

1. What line or moment from the play sticks with you? Why?



*The Tuskegee Airmen  
on a mission over Europe  
in World War II*

2. Identify the major conflicts in the play.

3. Identify the major issues the play addresses.

4. How do the cadets deal with their need to excel individually combined with their need to act as a group to succeed (on the ground or in the air)?

5. The cadets all wear similar uniforms, as do the officers. How does costuming give us not just a sense of the Army Air Corps during World War II but also develop issues in the play? Are the men all alike? To what extent? How are they different? Are the white characters given as much dimension as the black cadets? If so, when and why? If not, why not?

6. How many ways is that individual vs. group identity explored in the play, such as learning each man's first name and then having the instructor call them all "George"? Why?

7. Of the play's many theatrical elements—set, staging, music/dance, "flying" movement, costuming, sound, visuals, choice of style (realistic? suggestive?)—which for you best supported the production and made it effective? How and why?

8. How does the choice of the play's presentational style, including the tap griot, fit and enhance the idea of a memory play? of a play with things beneath the surface?



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