

THE AGITATORS

STUDY GUIDE



by Mat Smart

directed by Logan Vaughn

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Plot, Characters, and Setting pg 3
Interview with Playwright Mat Smart pg 4-5
Classroom Resources pg 6

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

ELA STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2 Write informative or explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.3 Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

ELA STANDARDS *cont.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

Objective 9.10.1: Identify leaders and major effects of nineteenth century social reform movements on the Western World.

Objective 10.7.2: Identify conditions that led to the women's movement, temperance movement, and other reform movements.

Objective 11.2.2: Discuss the impact of early civil rights movements on the lives of Americans.

Objective 12.5.1: Describe political limitations imposed on minority groups.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

TH.Re7.1 Perceive and analyze artistic work.

TH.Re8.1 Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

TH.Re9.1 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

TH.Cn10.1 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

TH.Cn11.1 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

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PLOT

The Agitators tells of the enduring but tempestuous friendship of Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass. Great allies? Yes, but at times great adversaries as well. The play follows the young abolitionists after they meet in Rochester in the 1840s, full of hopes and a common purpose. As they grow into cultural icons, their quests for freedom and equality collide, which tests their friendship. They agitated the nation and each other, and by doing so, helped shape the course of American history.

CHARACTERS

Susan B. Anthony

Susan B. Anthony was a lecturer, civil rights activist, abolitionist, and suffragist who is credited as one of the key figures who secured women's right to vote, though she would never live to see the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Born to a Quaker with family in Massachusetts, Anthony was immediately immersed in Quaker activist traditions and joined the Daughters of Temperance. In 1852, she met Cady B. Stanton and dedicated her life to women's suffrage after being denied the opportunity to speak at a temperance conference. Throughout her life and up until her death, she lectured and canvassed the nation hoping to secure the right to vote for women. Her efforts are covered in great detail in *A History of Woman's Suffrage Vol. I-III* and *The Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony*.



Susan B. Anthony
circa 1850.

Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was a writer, publisher, lecturer, civil servant, civil rights activist, abolitionist, and suffragist who was born into slavery in 1818. He would escape and teach himself how to read and write. Encouraged by abolitionists to speak of his experience, he would draw large crowds to his lecture across the nation and in Great Britain and Ireland. After the American Civil War, he would lead the fight to secure voting rights for recently freed slaves, which resulted in the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. From then on, he would work the rest of his life for civil rights and woman suffrage. Frederick Douglass' journey from being born into slavery to the first Presidentially appointed African American civil servant is covered in his autobiography *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.



"Let's Have Tea," a statue by Pepsy Kettavong in Rochester, New York, which commemorates the relationship between Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony.



Frederick Douglass
circa 1860.

SETTING

The Agitators tracks the relationship between Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass from 1849 to 1895. The play begins in Rochester, New York, and spans cities across the east coast: Boston; Albany, New York; New York City; and Washington, D.C.

FILLING IN THE BLANKS OF OUR HISTORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT

This interview was conducted by Geva Theatre Center's Literary Director and Resident Dramaturg Jenni Werner and was originally published in Geva's The Agitators Discovery Guide.

Jenni Werner (Literary Director/Resident Dramaturg):
Can you talk about the origins of *The Agitators*?

Mat Smart (Playwright): A couple of years ago while I was in Rochester working on my play *Tinker to Evers to Chance*, I went on a tour of the Susan B. Anthony Museum & House, and the docent mentioned that Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass were lifelong friends, but they had a big disagreement over the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave black men the right to vote – but not women. I couldn't believe that I had never heard that Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass were friends! Down the street from the house is Pepsy Kettavong's beautiful statue "Let's Have Tea," which shows Susan and Frederick having tea and talking. I was so moved by the familiarity that the statue invites – where kids can go up and climb on them and pretend to talk to them – that I wanted to investigate their friendship and write about it. We don't know what they said to each other behind closed doors, but we do know that they were often with each other; their families were friends, and they were at the same conventions and meetings frequently throughout their lives. I believe this is a place in history where the playwright is actually quite useful. It's been my job to fill in the blanks based on the facts.



Playwright Mat Smart

JW: Why do you think this is the right time to do that, to try to fill in the blanks?

MS: What scares me most about the political environment now is how it feels like there are two sides, and we're not talking to one another. The distance between people in this country seems to be growing greater and greater. And something that is so inspiring to me about Susan and Frederick was their ability to have a healthy, hard dialogue with the people they disagreed with; with the people who hated them. So I hope a lesson we can take from them is how we can better listen to people who believe different things than we believe, and how we may better agitate the people who disagree with us to change their thinking. Or vice versa. How do we see with someone else's eyes?

JW: Was it daunting to approach this story?

MS: These are two of the greatest Americans to ever live. So how could I possibly write the words that they would say? How could I possibly get inside their heads? I feel a great responsibility to honor them, but to do so by showing their flaws and humanity. I mentioned Pepsy Kettavong's statue "Let's Have Tea" was an inspiration for me. I had the opportunity to talk to Pepsy, and he said something that really stayed with me about how he approaches his art. He said that he doesn't do "pedestal art." And that what he loved so much about Susan and Frederick was that they were truly about equality, about taking people off the pedestal, so that we all have equal opportunity and equal rights. And so I've really tried to approach the play that way. Also, whenever I've felt stuck, I've gone back to their words. They both spoke and wrote so much, and lived so long, that there's a wealth of material directly from the source.

JW: Were there other people that helped you figure out how to get into the story?

MS: Both Frederick and Susan have sentinels that are looking out for them – the experts in the field. I've been lucky enough, both in Rochester and throughout the country, to befriend these sentinels and they've had a huge impact on the work that I've done. Rose O'Keefe wrote a book called *Frederick and Anna Douglass in Rochester*. She showed me around Rochester – some of the sites that were important for Frederick. In her book, there's a little story about a baseball game that Frederick's son played in, in Rochester, and that's become a scene in the play. I wouldn't have thought to have a scene at a baseball game when you're dealing with Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony! But that was a major event in Rochester in August of 1870. John Stauffer wrote an amazing book called *Giants*, a dual biography of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. He really showed me how Frederick had this amazing capacity for forgiveness, and how he believed in the fluidity of self, and the possibility for people to change. On the Susan B. Anthony side, it was a dream to get to know Deborah Hughes, who's the President of the Susan B. Anthony Museum & House, and talk to her very early on in my writing process about who Susan was and the fights she fought, and the more complicated parts of her history – how to make sense of those. And to do that while we were actually at her house, and to be able to look at original letters, original artifacts of Susan's, was a real joy. Lynn Sherr, who wrote the book *Failure is Impossible*, and Ann Gordon, who was the editor of *The Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, were also instrumental in helping me out. I just wanted to get it right. And these people have really helped me in that endeavor, and I feel indebted to them. It's been one of the most satisfying journeys of my career, to get to know Susan and Frederick through the people who care about them – especially the people in Rochester.

JW: Are there things that you learned about these two people that surprised you?

MS: The University of Rochester's Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation department has some unpublished letters that Susan wrote late in her life that I got to read, and they're very emotional; they're very sentimental. She had a huge heart. In some of her more political writing, you don't necessarily get that. Right when I was starting out on this project, I became friends with Luticha Doucette, who works in the Mayor's office and knows a ton about Frederick. I was asking her about Frederick, and what she thought I needed to get right. "Don't leave out his anger," she said. And as I read his writing, his speeches, there really is a ferociousness to him that I think is important to honor. He was on fire about these issues and about fighting for justice. He was so clear-sighted. His anger was a big part of that. What he did wasn't easy, and I think sometimes we can look back at these heroes of our history and think that they were beloved and appreciated in their own times. And they were in some ways. But they made a lot of people very, very upset. It's important not to leave that out.

JW: Do you have any feeling about what allowed them to have those conversations, and what kept them moving forward?

MS: By all accounts I've read about them, they were incredibly charismatic, magnetic, and inexhaustible souls. They were driven by the belief that this country could live up to its promise. They couldn't let that promise down. I think they were possessed by knowing what was right, and what we could do as a country. They were special and they were brave. That's how they were able to face those crowds that opposed them.

JW: How has writing this play impacted you? Do you feel that there's a lasting impression that creating this piece of art has made on you?

MS: Absolutely. A lot of what this play is about is vision. And how can we keep opening our eyes wider and wider. The play has become, in some ways, about Susan confronting the gender bias that Frederick may have had, and about Frederick confronting the racial bias that Susan may have had. And in doing that, I've had to confront my own racial and gender biases that I didn't know were there. And that's been a difficult, and challenging, and rewarding process, and one that I'm still working on. But I'm just amazed at how much Susan and Frederick can teach us – if we let them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. Think about a time that you wanted something so badly you would do anything to get it. What strategies did you employ to achieve your goal? What compromises were you willing to make, if any?
2. The two actors who play Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass will portray these historic figures at multiple points during their forty-six-year friendship. How do you think the actors and designers will demonstrate the passage of time, and location, during the play?



Cedric Mays and Madeleine Lambert in the original production of *The Agitators* at Geva Theatre Center in Rochester, New York.

POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. Music plays a large role in telling the story of *The Agitators*, from Douglass' violin to the contemporary music used in the scene transitions. How did music affect your understanding of the performance?
2. Frederick Douglass offers this prayer towards the end of the play: "Lord—Will you, one day, give us the strength to fight for each other as much as we fight for ourselves?" While Anthony and Douglass both worked to secure universal American suffrage, their priorities greatly differed. How do you think that people with different priorities can work together to help each other achieve their goals?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. **On Your Feet: Get out the vote!** Even before you turn 18 and can cast your ballot, you can help others register to vote and highlight the importance of practicing your civic duty. Working with your classmates, design a campaign to encourage voter registration and participation. What means will be most effective in relaying your message? Will you target members of your school community, or is there any other community that needs to receive this message?
2. **At Your Seat:** Who are today's agitators, and what changes are they seeking in America and the world? In the spirit of Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass, who were both powerful orators, write a speech to give to your classmates that highlights a chosen modern "agitator" and their social justice cause. Thoroughly research your agitator, their cause, and their opposition. What tools does your agitator employ to encourage others to join their cause? Evaluate the effectiveness of your peer's speeches. How did the speaker's use of evidence and rhetoric affect their speech?