

# FREEDOM RIDER

## STUDY GUIDE



Written by Ricardo Khan in collaboration with  
Kathleen McGhee-Anderson, Murray Horwitz,  
Nathan Louis Jackson, and Nikkole Salter

Directed by Ricardo Khan

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ASF is committed to supporting educators in the classroom. By engaging with this play and all others in our regular season, teachers will be able to address several standards in the state and national curriculum. It is our hope that all study materials and lesson activities are useful for classroom educators, though not exhaustive. Viewing a performance at Alabama Shakespeare Festival and participating in the post-performance discussion can serve as a powerful springboard for positive classroom discourse, detailed and specific writing, and rich individual student exploration. Below you will find just a few of the possibilities for aligning your study of our productions to National Core Arts and Common Core literacy standards.

## COMMON CORE STATE 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/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.9-10.3 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.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.11-12.1-3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS *cont.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.11-12.7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist).

## SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

11.12 Trace events of the modern Civil Rights Movement from post-World War II to 1970 that resulted in social and economic changes, including the Montgomery bus boycott, the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School, the March on Washington, and the Freedom Rides.

- Objective 11.12.1: Describe the impact of Jim Crow Laws on African Americans
- Objective 11.12.2: Identify major civil rights leaders who influenced the modern Civil Rights Movement.
- Objective 11.12.3: Identify major events of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

## NATIONAL CORE ARTS ANCHOR 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.

## PLOT

This play is a stylized tale inspired by true historical events. John F. Kennedy has just been elected president of the United States. The Space Race of 1961 is on against the Soviet Union, and four young people are about to embark on a journey that will inspire a new generation of Civil Rights Activists. The journey would come to be known as the Freedom Rides — a series of trips through the American South taken by ordinary people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds to challenge segregation on interstate buses.

The play opens with families saying their goodbyes and training sessions being run by CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) in Washington, D.C. prior to the start of the May 1961 Freedom Rides. This training painfully foreshadows the horror these characters would ultimately face. As the story barrels on toward the inevitable, it highlights three key demonstrations: An encounter on a Trailways bus with a white woman who mistakes one of the passengers for white. An encounter in the colored bathroom, and a run-in with a town sheriff at a South Carolina lunch counter.

Ultimately, the “Freedom Fighters” now coined the “Freedom Riders” by the nation are left badly bruised and beaten in a Birmingham hospital after two planned attacks on Mother’s Day, 1961: the Greyhound bus bombing in Anniston, Alabama and the Birmingham Riots. Their sacrifices galvanize the nation and spark the involvement of thousands of young people in the modern Civil Rights Movement.

**Think about it:** In 2018, Greta Thunberg, a fifteen year old climate change activist from Sweden, took a stand by herself to demand immediate action to prevent a global environmental disaster. She inspired millions of people around the world with her cause. How can we compare activism of the past to modern day activism? Could you name a cause you’d be willing to step forward for and defend?

## CHARACTERS

**Joan Carter** - A young white college student from Compton, California. Secret love interest of Lloyd LaBostrie.

**Lloyd LaBostrie** - A young black college student from Compton, California. Reluctant to join the movement for fear of what might happen to him.

**Phillip Brody** - A young Jewish student from Wittenberg University in Ohio.

**Fred Swanson** - A young Lutheran student from Wittenberg University in Ohio. He befriends Carl Weeks.

**Bill Slutzky** - A young Jewish student from Wittenberg University in Ohio.

**Carl Weeks** - A young black student from Harlem, New York who attends Howard University in Washington, D.C. He’s a leader amongst the group, very passionate.

**Wanda Weeks** - Carl’s mother. A transplant from the Caribbean. Her son’s education and safety are her primary concerns.

**Jennifer Allen** - A high school senior from Detroit, Michigan. She’s fair skinned and mistakenly passes for white.

**Bernard Allen** - Jennifer’s father. Very resistant to his daughter’s involvement in the movement.

**Priscilla Allen** - Jennifer’s loving mother.

**Angela Birdsong** - A black grade school teacher turned activist from Philadelphia.

**Shirley** - Lunch counter woman in South Carolina.

### Other Characters:

**Reporter, Voice of Mission Control, Core Trainers, Bus Driver, Sheriff, Female passenger, South Carolina woman, South Carolina man, Chorus members, FBI Informant, Voice of Martin Luther King, Bull Connor, Howard K. Smith, and Diane Nash.**

## SETTING

1961, Compton, California; Detroit, Michigan; Harlem, New York; Wittenberg College, Ohio; a Trailways bus, and various locations in the segregated American South during a period known as the modern Civil Rights Movement.

**JARAS** - An acronym created to help the Freedom Riders remember their training. **J**oint action. **A**ttire. **R**etaliati**A**tion. **A**ttitude. **S**inging.

**CORE** - The **C**ongress of **R**acial **E**quality. This group worked to train the Freedom Riders for their dangerous journey through the South.

**Journey of Reconciliation** - The lesser known "First Freedom Ride" that occurred in April of 1947, shortly after the supreme court ruling outlawing segregation on interstate travel. This year marks the 75th anniversary of that journey.

**SNCC** - The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The committee was formed in response to the efforts of the young Freedom Riders. Diane Nash was one of the organization's most prolific leaders.

**Gone with the Wind** - A romance film that debuted in 1936. Though very popular then, it has a controversial legacy. The film featured Hattie McDaniel, the first African American woman to win an Oscar award for acting.

**Fred Shuttlesworth** - An African American baptist minister and Civil Rights Activist who worked with Dr. Martin Luther King to end segregation in the American South.

**The Space Race of the 1960s** - The space race began when the Soviet Union launched the satellite Sputnik into outer space to orbit Earth. President Kennedy began an expansion of the U.S. Space Program with an ambitious goal to be the first to land a man on the moon.

**Hymns and Spirituals** - The modern Civil Rights Movement was born out of the Black church, as many of the leaders of the 1960s were ministers. These songs, some dating back to slavery, became a rallying cry and source of strength for protesters to remain nonviolent.

**Fisk University** - a historically black college in Nashville, Tennessee that was founded in 1866.

**Howard University** - a very well-known historically black college in Washington, D.C. that was founded in 1867.

**Wittenberg College** - a private liberal arts college in Springfield, Ohio that was founded in 1845.



Freedom Summer volunteers singing "We Shall Overcome"

Photo: Ted Polumbaum, Newseum Collection



**“If not us, then who? If not now, then when? Will there be a better day for it tomorrow or next year? Will it be less dangerous then? Will someone else’s children have to risk their lives instead of us risking ours?”**

These were the words of a 21-year-old John Lewis to his fellow college students in 1961 as they contemplated joining what was to become one of the most important, racially galvanizing moments in the American movement for civil rights.

On May 4, 1961, a group of young people, black and white, from colleges and universities across the country, boarded two buses southbound from Washington, D.C. on a journey to prove that love and compassion could conquer hate, and that what was a right for one American should be a right for all Americans. In spite of the dangers they knew they would have to face, for them it was a cause worth fighting for. Sixty years later though, while better in many ways, America is still too often a disappointing reflection of what we haven’t yet fixed. Injustice and ruthlessness continue vastly unchecked in black and brown communities, and hate speech now emboldens a widening, more frightening fringe population than ever, it seems.

I’ve wanted to offer this shining example of a moment [when] people crossed lines of ethnicity, religion, geography, and personal background to come together in a fight against injustice. I’ve wanted to tell this story because there’s work still to be done, and it’s everybody’s work. And as an artist deeply affected by the spirit of ancestors and our history, and its impact on today, “Freedom Rider” for me is a personal journey of passion, calling and purpose. And I am grateful to be so honored by this production and for the chance to tell a story that might inspire courage and real change in our own lives and times.

I was determined from the beginning to avoid “Freedom Rider” being just a history lesson even though the events are profoundly historic. My intent was to honor the spirit of the riders by creating a play driven by people’s stories — four specific young individuals who were idealists and yet very different from each other, and who had no idea of what they were really getting themselves into. In an experiment and on faith, I reached out to four playwrights I knew who had personal family histories that reminded me of one of each of the four characters I was developing. I asked if they would join me in a collaboration to write this play, each with an initial focus on the story of one of its four central characters. They did! The project took five years with me being carefully respectful of each of our individual writing processes. Eventually, we started involving a series of developmental workshops that, over time, helped weave, intersect, and merge the four story lines. And finally, it was my job to develop and massage the storytelling into a final, flowing, organic script. The journey was beautiful, heartwarming, and life changing. And the result was this joyous new act of theatre-making! And while the unique creative journey was peppered with the creative challenges one might expect from such a process, *Freedom Rider* emerged as an original piece of theatre art we are so very proud of, relying on non-realism and imagination, and a character-shifting ensemble of 12 actors/singers to tell the story of hundreds in what we hope will be a dynamically visceral and stylized experience.

Finally, I believe this collaboration of two important American theatre companies today is what makes all this possible artistically and profoundly relevant to today’s conversations on race and equity and how theatres across divides can work together and as members of a unique and awesome industry. Alabama Shakespeare Festival — committed to excellence on stage for nearly 50 years while serving as a cultural conduit for communities throughout the South is one. The other is the Crossroads Theatre Company — with an esteemed record of original works that seek to tell the African American story. This opportunity is invaluable to us as writers and creatives, and helps to expand and deepen the artistic process in the making of a world premiere. But it also represents what I believe is the American Theatre at its best, with theatres of diverse missions, backgrounds, and audience/community bases, coming together, in respect and as equals, to work on the telling of an American story.



Ricardo Khan, Director and Co-creator of *Freedom Rider*

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A white mob attack on Freedom Riders traveling by bus in Anniston, Alabama on May 14, 1961.

On Sunday, May 14, 1961, an angry white mob charged after a Greyhound bus transporting Freedom Riders passing through Anniston, Alabama. As the bus driver made an attempt to dodge the violent crowd, they began clubbing with bats, smashing windows, and slashing tires. A firebomb was thrown onto the bus, nearly trapping the passengers inside. They were able to escape as the bus burst into flames but were badly beaten by the mob. Police arrived on the scene and eventually quelled the violence. The passengers were transported to a hospital in Birmingham that was willing to treat them at the request of Fred Shuttlesworth, an African American Baptist minister.

A Trailways bus, known as “the other bus,” carrying Freedom Riders pulled into Birmingham, Alabama on the same day as the Greyhound bus bombing in Anniston. A mob of Ku Klux Klan members boarded and attacked the passengers on the bus and in the terminal. Both black and white Freedom Riders were brutally beaten with clubs, bats, lead pipes, and other weapons. The public safety commissioner, Bull Connor, had close ties with the KKK. He promised the Klansmen no less than fifteen minutes to welcome the Freedom Riders to Birmingham before the police would arrive. Despite the violence against them, the movement would continue. U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy ordered a police escort for a new group of Freedom Riders later in the same month.

**Think about it:** The Freedom Riders suffered a great deal of violence from angry mobs and Klansmen, but they never retaliated — meaning they never reacted with violence. What was the importance of nonviolence to Civil Rights activism? Do you think it was effective?



A group of Klansmen beating the Freedom Riders in the Birmingham Trailways bus station, May 14, 1961

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PRE-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The people who participated in the Freedom Rides were not well-known political activists. Many were young college students who simply wanted to make a difference. Would you be willing to “get on the bus” for a cause you believed in even though it might be dangerous? Why or why not?
2. A national law, *Morgan v. Virginia*, was passed in 1946 declaring segregation on interstate travel illegal in the United States. If there was already a law in place for social justice, were the Freedom Rides necessary? Why or why not?

### POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The play opens with CORE trainers engaging in reenactments and demonstrating the abuse the Freedom Riders would face on their journey through the south. Why do you think it was important to practice for these inevitable confrontations? Explain.
2. This play is a stylized interpretation of historical events. The authors took artistic license to create characters rather than adapt an autobiographical piece. Why do you think they made this choice? Was it effective? Explain.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. **At your desk:** Toward the end of the play, the CORE trainers give the remaining Freedom Riders instructions to write their wills. They each make a list of their most precious possessions and choose who to bestow them upon. What items do you own that have precious value to you? Make a list and explain what makes each item special. You may share your list with the class or bring in an item to display.

*Teachers:* You will find Carl's will and an activity sheet attached for students to complete this activity.

2. **At your desk:** Create a poster or sign for the Freedom Rides of 1961. Imagine one of the passengers carrying your sign or attaching it to the side of the bus. What might your poster look like? Does it have words or catchy phrases? Does it only have imagery? Get creative! Use lots of color. Make a statement!

*Variation:* Think about a cause you believe in now! What is it? Create a poster that gives a call to action to your peers. Work together as a class to form a strategy to get the whole school involved. Who knows, it could inspire the nation!

**Teachers:** You will find additional classroom activity sheets attached below! Use them however you like. Please let us know if you find these helpful or have other ideas for additional resources.



A group of Freedom Riders holding picket signs while riding through the South. 1961

## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Anticipation Guide

Carl's Will

What Do You Value Most Activity Sheet

Packing for the Bus

Responding to Live Theatre: Critical Response

## ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES

*The Freedom Riders, Then and Now*

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-freedom-riders-then-and-now-45351758/>

*Freedom Riders — HISTORY*

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/freedom-rides>

United States Civil Rights Trail

<https://civilrightstrail.com/>

Map of the Freedom Riders Route

[https://www.tripline.net/trip/Map\\_of\\_the\\_Freedom\\_Riders\\_Route-1657536071131003B660B6A5907EC2AD](https://www.tripline.net/trip/Map_of_the_Freedom_Riders_Route-1657536071131003B660B6A5907EC2AD)



Before you see the show, respond to the following statements as honestly as possible by circling your response and then explain your answer with an example.

SA – Strongly Agree, A – Agree, SD – Strongly Disagree, D – Disagree

<b>STATEMENT #1:</b> I stand up for what's right even if I have to stand alone.			
SA	A	SD	D
Explain your answer with an example:			

<b>STATEMENT #2:</b> Making a decision too quickly is always wrong.			
SA	A	SD	D
Explain your answer with an example:			

<b>STATEMENT #3:</b> You don't have to be famous to have influence on others.			
SA	A	SD	D
Explain your answer with an example:			

<b>STATEMENT #4:</b> Those who choose not to protest injustice are part of the problem.			
SA	A	SD	D
Explain your answer with an example:			

**Teachers:** A variation of this activity: "Four Corners." Make signs with the SA, A, SD, and D labels. Then, ask the students to stand in the middle of the classroom. Repeat each question aloud (or create new ones) and allow them to move to the corner of the room that best represents their opinion. Discuss.

Hey Mama,

How are things back home? I miss you guys. I am safe. Hopefully, that comes as a relief to you, considering what happened in Anniston. I did know some people in that incident but I WAS NOT ON THAT BUS.

We were given the choice to continue the trip or catch another bus back home.

Some stayed, some didn't. I am staying.

So we are being instructed to write a will. Mine is very short because I'm just starting to live my life so I don't have a whole lot to give away.

1. My denim jacket should go to my sister Sheila. You said it looked like a girl's jacket so that should work out great.
2. I have this notebook I carry around and write down my thoughts in. Give it to Dad. He and I don't talk as much as I would like, so give him my notebook. I would hate for him to never get to know me.
3. My set of blue dominoes. I love those bones. I always thought I'd be buried with them. But give them to the kids down at the community center.
4. My signed Jackie Robinson baseball. Bury me with that.
5. And anything else you find goes to you. Because you're my Mom, and if it weren't for you I wouldn't have any of it anyway.

I love you all. I will see you soon,

Carl

# WHAT DO YOU VALUE MOST? (MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL)

**Directions:** For this activity, make a list of items you own that have precious value to you; explain what makes them special.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_

**The things I own that have precious value to me are:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

It has precious value to me because: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

It has precious value to me because: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

It is precious value to me because: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

It is precious value to me because: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

It is precious value to me because: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Many of the Freedom Riders left home not knowing what they would face as they traveled through the segregated South. They each packed their suitcases with what they felt were the essentials. If you were packing for this dangerous journey, what items would you take with you? Use the suitcase below to draw your items. Use color! Make your suitcase unique! It should tell a story.



## **FREEDOM RIDER: CRITICAL REVIEW**

**Directions:** Imagine you are the theatre critic for this production at ASF! For each area of the production, give thoughtful and honest feedback. Be specific and answer each prompt using complete sentences. Use the back of the page if necessary.

### **I. Playwright/Story**

Use the space below to discuss elements of the story. What worked well? Did anything strike you negatively?

### **II. Performance/Acting**

Use the space below to give constructive feedback about the actors' performances in the production. Was there a performer that you particularly enjoyed? What could have been better?

### **III. Directing**

Use the space below to discuss the overall direction and interpretation of this production. Remember, nothing happens by accident. Did anything surprise you?

### **IV. Technical Elements**

Use the space below to discuss the lighting, sound, scenery, and costumes for this production. Were you transported to a different time/place? Did these elements effectively serve the story?