

JUBILEE

STUDY GUIDE



Written and Directed by Tazewell Thompson

Dianne Adams McDowell for Vocal Arrangements

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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 the *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).

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),

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS *cont.*

evaluating how each version interprets the source text (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist).

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.

MUSIC STANDARD(S):

MUS (3)(4)(5).16 Demonstrate and describe how selected music connects to and is influenced by specific interests, experiences, or purposes.

SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

SS.2.11 Interpret legends, stories, and songs that contributed to the development of the cultural history of the United States.

SS.4.6 Describe cultural, economic, and political aspects of the lifestyles of early nineteenth-century farmers, plantation owners, slaves, and townspeople.

SS.5.11 Identify causes of the Civil War, including states' rights and the issue of slavery.

SS.9.10 Describe the influence of urbanization on the Western World during the nineteenth century.

Brandy Blackburn, Graphic Designer

Copy Editing by **Leigh Owen**, Marketing Manager

PLOT

The events in this a cappella musical are inspired by the true story of the *Jubilee Singers* — told in retrospective view — from their humble beginnings to the events surrounding their growing notoriety in the U.S. and abroad. Their journey initially begins in hopes to save their school from financial despair. At the opening of the play, we find the ensemble posed as if in a painting until Ella Shepherd, the choir’s assistant director, steps out and, with great discipline, prepares the group for vocal exercises. From here the play whisks off to various locations and performance venues throughout what would become a famously successful tour.

Throughout the play, the characters often step forward, breaking the “fourth wall,” to bring the audience along on their journey with impeccably blended, soul-stirring hymns and spirituals — sharing a heritage of suffering, strength, and endurance. By the end of the play, the audience is left with a tearful mosaic — a living museum of stories about the lives of this group of young Black college students who had accomplished so much simply by lifting their voices against extraordinary odds.

Think about it: The “fourth wall” is an imaginary wall that separates the audience (the real world) from the story. That boundary is broken when actors address the audience directly. It’s sort of like stepping outside of the play. Why do you think the playwright might’ve used this device to help tell this story?

CHARACTERS

The characters in the play (listed below) are the actual names and stories of the original Fisk Jubilee Singers who were part of the ensemble’s inception in 1871.

Ella Shepherd – The assistant director and leader of the ensemble. She’s incredibly disciplined, with a strong sense of destiny and purpose. Her mother attempted to end both of their lives to escape slavery when she was very young.

Minnie Tate – A fair-skinned young girl from a hardworking family. Joining the group at only thirteen, she’s regarded as “little sister.”

Greene Evans – He finds his identity in being known as a “Jubileer!” He doesn’t know his real age or the origin of his name. He hopes being part of the Jubilee Singers will allow him to leave something behind that matters.

Jennie Jackson – A young dark-skinned girl and former slave. Her mother taught her to have a sense of pride and love for herself. Anxious for things to start looking better.

Benjamin Holmes – A teacher and advanced student at Fisk.

Isaac Dickerson – Orphaned at an early age. He personally witnessed the sale of his mother and father at a slave auction. The only thing he’s ever known was singing.

Maggie Porter — A true prima donna. She’s a lyric soprano who is very confident in her ability to impress and move an audience with her vocal agility.

Thomas Rutling — His mother instilled a love and appreciation for singing. He struggles with the trauma of his mother being sold and taken away from him. Singing helps him preserve her memory.

***The characters listed above were part of the original nine members of the ensemble.*

Additional Characters:

America Robinson – She has always struggled with accepting her name. She was beaten by her mother’s mistress when she was very young, leaving a permanent scar. Attending Fisk gave her an opportunity to escape.

Georgia Gordon – Proud, stubborn, romantic. Her mother was white, and her father was a slave. She’s the love interest of Frederick Loudin.

Edmund Watkins – He has been on his own for most of his life because he has no family. By chance, he taught himself to spell, count, read, and write.

Frederick Loudin – Love interest of Georgia. He’s the son of a free-born Negro. Education and independence are paramount to him.

Mabel Lewis – She has very strong faith and is always concerned about the health and well-being of her fellow Jubilee Singers.

Think about it: On one excursion, the Jubilee Singers encountered an angry white mob. In the face of violence, the students began to sing a hymn. When they finished, the leader of the mob, moved to tears, begged them to sing again. Why do you think music in general has the ability to transform hearts and minds this way? What really moved this man?

SETTING

Nineteenth century and the present, various locations in the U.S. and in Europe.

In 1866, six months after the end of the Civil War, Fisk University was founded in Nashville, Tennessee in a former Union Army hospital barracks complex. At its inception, the school was known as the Fisk Free Colored School named after General Clinton B. Fisk who provided the facilities for this new institution.

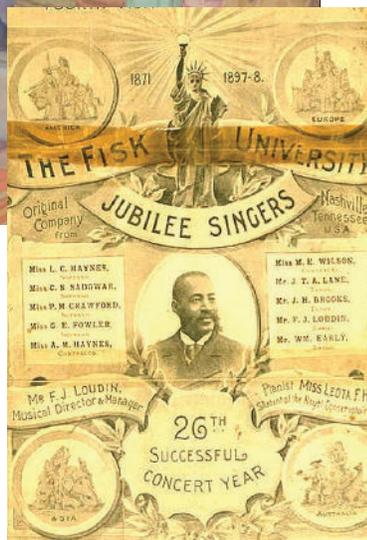
In 1871, just a few years after Fisk University was established to educate newly freed enslaved people, the Fisk University Jubilee Singers choral ensemble was born. Though its purpose to educate “young men and women irrespective of color” was noble, the school found itself deep in debt.



Fisk Jubilee Singers, 1900-1. Credit...Fisk University, John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Special Collections



Fisk Jubilee Singers perform for Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace, 1873.



Fourth International Tour to Great Britain, 1897-98

George Leonard White, a white abolitionist who served as university treasurer and professor of music, formed the ensemble, choosing the very best students in the Fisk voice class and taking them on tour with a goal to “sing the money out of the hearts and pockets of the people.” He enlisted the assistance of **Ella Shepherd**, a very promising student who, in addition to singing with the ensemble, would serve as a rehearsal accompanist and assistant director.

By 1873, the group began making plans to embark upon an international tour of the British Isles. A special feature of this journey would include a personal invitation to perform for Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom.

The original ensemble disbanded in 1878 after Mr. White quit, citing lack of rest for the students, harsh touring conditions, low wages, and several bouts of illness. In 1879, a new Jubilee Singers ensemble was formed with several original members. This troupe enjoyed the success of a second European tour.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers tradition continues today with a permanently endowed, Grammy Award-winning voice program. The day the original ensemble embarked on their first tour to save the school is recognized as Jubilee Day — October 6. Fisk University is known as one of the nation’s leading HBCUs, celebrating more than 150 years of a rich tradition of excellence.



Fisk Jubilee Singers, 2019. Photo Courtesy of Fisk University.

REFERENCES TO KNOW

Choral Master – One who directs and rehearses the singing chorus of an opera company or leader of a musical ensemble.

Gregorian Unison/Chanting – Born out of the Roman Catholic Church, a form of unaccompanied sacred song usually performed in Latin or Greek.

a cappella – Singing without instrumental accompaniment.

Aria – An elaborate melody sung by a single voice.

Prima Donna – A principal female singer in an opera or musical ensemble; this term also often refers to a “diva” or person who is difficult to work with.

Spirituals – Sacred songs that are passed down from ancestors who were enslaved.

Jubes – A nickname the Jubilee Singers used as a term of endearment.

Greenbacks – A slang term for U.S. dollars or legal-tender notes issued by the U.S. government first used during the Civil War.

Mulatto – An offensive racial term to classify a person with mixed race, usually of Black and White ancestry.

Barracks – A building or set of buildings used to house laborers or soldiers.

Three Rs – A phrase coined in the nineteenth century to identify the three basic skills taught in schools: reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Phonograph – An early sound-reproducing system with a large horn to amplify sound, also known as a record player.

Minstrel Show – An offensive theatrical entertainment genre depicting people of African descent usually performed by White Americans in “blackface.”

Vaudeville – A theatrical performance genre that included various forms of singing, dancing, and comedic acts.

Jubilee – A season of celebration in many cultures, also a religious song of African Americans usually referring to a time of future happiness.

FROM THE SCRIPT: ABOUT THE SONGS

All of the songs in the play are Negro Spirituals. From the beginning, these songs (later known after 1865 as field or work songs, shouts or moans, or jubilees) were inspired by African music, even if the tunes were not far from those of hymns. The styles of performing the songs were constantly evolving, being experimented with, and continually changing. Sometimes the vocal arrangements were straightforward “call and response,” with a single leader or caller and a response chorus of a few or dozens. Many times the songs were complex and multi-parted, sometimes accompanied by simple rhythmic body swaying or as rigorous physical action, hand clapping and foot stomping/tapping. The songs tell a story or emit strong, emotional strains of state of mind and circumstance: joyous/celebratory, grief, sorrow, or tragedy. The songs chosen for *Jubilee* are thematic and action-driven and help to move the story forward. All the songs are sung a cappella and in the public domain.



“Jubilee” at Arena Stage, Washington, D.C.
Photo by Margot Schulman.

Think about it: These songs are known to be part of the DNA of American music. Can you think of any other genres of music that may have been influenced by spirituals from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

Q. What's your connection to Fisk University and how did you come to know about the Jubilee Singers? What did you find most intriguing about them that inspired you to write their story?

A. I've known about the Fisk Jubilee Singers since I was a child. I grew up a Roman Catholic, knew and sang liturgical hymns and Gregorian chants as an altar boy and member of the church choir. I was introduced to Negro Spirituals by my very progressive grade school music teacher, Sister Benvenuta, at Saint Dominic's Convent. I was immediately drawn to the sweet meaningful simplicity of the lyrics and the extraordinary heartbreaking expressiveness of the music. I collect Negro Spirituals. I've hundreds in my collection; books and lead sheets. My curating particular Negro Spirituals to form a story was a natural step to honor my love and respect for both the Fisk Jubilee Singers and theater. There are nearly 7,000 Negro Spirituals.

Q. What do you say to critics of the tradition of singing spirituals or "slave songs" who, like Ella Shepherd in her early days, believe these sacred songs celebrate a dark past and things to be forgotten?

A. The songs, called "slave songs," because they were sung by slaves (also known as field, work or plantation songs) do not "celebrate a dark past," not at all. Negro Spirituals acknowledges a history of the painful bondage of slavery, out of which grew songs of hope and a longing for freedom and bonded a community of Blacks, stripped of everything, save their musical gift of making and singing songs. This special musical gift allowed The Fisk Jubilee Singers, in the 19th century, to sing their songs world-wide to lucrative results, saving an educational facility: Fisk University.

Q. Talk about the choice to use a retrospective point of view to tell this story. The characters often break the fourth wall to address the audience directly; they also speak in past tense. Why was it important to tell the story this way?

A. Shakespeare, The Greeks, Thornton Wilder, Brecht, Beckett, Tennessee Williams, among many playwrights; opera and musical theater; children's theatre; Woody Allen movies, all employ usage of the fourth wall— its a way of inviting the audience in to play a role in the storytelling. I love this theatrical device. I use it in all my work. Presenting JUBILEE in the past tense for me is my way of paying tribute to the original Fisk Jubilee Singers. I tell their story in their time, as it happened, through 43 Negro Spirituals, sung a capella, as they would've sung them. We hear and witness their obstacles, sacrifices, heartache, relationships and ultimately celebrate, with them, their unprecedented major accomplishments.

Q. The final song, "Do Lord, Remember Me," seems to echo the central point of the piece. Can you talk about what you hope audiences, particularly young people, will gain from this wonderfully unique theatrical tribute?

A. The Negro Spiritual, its DNA is in every Black American musical tradition. The Negro Spiritual is the root, spine, scaffold, blueprint and, ultimately, the heart and soul of what gave way to blues, jazz, gospel, rock and roll, and, yes, most definitely to hip-hop! If you love American history, in general, and therefore, Black history, in particular— as well as all forms of American musical genre— you will hear the early beginnings of our history in America as told through JUBILEE, an a cappella musical about The Fisk Jubilee Singers.



Think about it: The original Jubilee Singers traveled all over the world with one goal in mind — saving their school. Whether or not they knew it then, they would leave behind a legacy that is still celebrated almost two centuries later. How would you like to be remembered in your community? Are there any causes or issues within your school or community that you could work with your peers to champion?

PAIRED TEXT: “WE WEAR THE MASK” BY PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in 1872 to freed slaves and rose to become one of the most prominent literary figures of the late 1800s. At the age of just twenty-three, he penned “We Wear the Mask.” This poem is considered one of the greatest pieces of social commentary on the Black experience in the nineteenth century and one of Dunbar’s most famous works.

We Wear the Mask
by Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!



Paul Laurence Dunbar circa 1890

Think about it: Take a moment to analyze and reflect on each stanza of the poem. Do you notice a prominent refrain? How does that relate to the pilgrimage of the Jubilee Singers and the lives of Black Americans in the nineteenth century? Does this poem have any relevance today?

FURTHER READING...

Jubilee is a historical novel by Margaret Walker. Set in Georgia and Alabama in the mid-nineteenth century, it chronicles the story of a brave heroine named Vyry, the child of a white plantation owner and a slave who lived during the American Civil War. The book weaves together oral accounts from Walker’s grandmother, while being deeply rooted in historical research. Appropriate for grades 7-12.

Content advisory: The N-word is used in this text. Although it reflects the period, it is important to remind students that this language is inappropriate to use before you begin.



Margaret Walker

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think about the word “jubilee.” What imagery does it evoke for you about this piece? We know the play is a tribute to the famous choral ensemble. Can you decipher any foreshadowing from the title alone? Explain.
2. All the characters in the play are portrayals of real Fisk University students who were original Jubilee Singers. How do you think this play might honor them and their contributions to American music? Explain.

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. We asked the playwright to share his thoughts on the criticism of preserving this music genre. Many of those critics feel these “slave songs” celebrate a dark past that should be forgotten. Do you agree? Explain.
2. Though George White and Queen Victoria are prominent characters in the piece, they never actually appear. Instead, both characters are played by Ella Shepherd, the ensemble’s assistant director. Why do you think the playwright made this choice? Explain.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. On your feet: Tableau! The Jubilee Singers were well known for their portraits in period wardrobe complete with crinolines, bustles, double-breasted coats, and linen cravats. Queen Victoria famously commissioned a special painting of them in their now iconic pose. Jubileers have been striking this pose for more than 150 years! A frozen image of a group of people that tells a story is called a “tableau.” Try creating your own tableau with your classmates! Divide the class into groups. Each group will choose a card (attached below) and have 30 seconds to create a tableau to match. Allow the other groups to guess what their peers’ tableaus are. If the class struggles making a guess for a particular group, give them another 20 seconds to get more specific. For more fun, reduce the time to 10 seconds! No time to chat — just quick thinking! Specificity is key for this exercise.

Variation: Have each group research famous portraits/tableaus and try their best to replicate the images. Once they’ve successfully recreated the image in actual space, have them write a short scene or monologue for the characters they have created. Perform. Discuss. (Examples: The Last Supper, the Marine Corps memorial, etc.)

2. At your desk: Think about a song or poem from any genre that has an emotional or personal connection for you. Research the lyrics and copy down one chorus, verse, or stanza. Think about the meaning of the words and why they resonate with you. Think about the central voice and who the voice could be addressing. Use the Brain Dump worksheet (attached below) to jot down some key themes or ideas. It doesn’t have to be linear; write all over the page! After you’ve completed your brain dump, circle five key themes that stand out the most. Write a monologue in prose from the perspective of the voice in the piece that captures those five themes. Share with your classmates. Discuss.

Variation: 1. Have the class try to guess the original song that inspired each new work. 2. Pair students whose prose pieces fit in the same world and have them write a scene together. 3. Include aspects of theatrical design. Have the students create a production poster for their new work or design an element of their peers’ work (costumes, scenery, lighting, sound, etc.)! Get creative! Have fun!

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.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Tableau Activity Cards

Song-O-Log Brain Dump worksheet

Anticipation Activity

Responding to Live Theatre: Jubilee Critical Response

ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES

Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/singers/>

George Leonard White - PBS American Experience

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/singers-white/>

How the Fisk Jubilee Singers Saved Their University

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yID4zvvN79Y>

Fisk Jubilee Singers

<https://fiskjubileesingers.org/>

African American Spirituals: Library of Congress

<https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/>

About Tazewell Thompson, the Playwright & Director

<http://www.tazewellthompson.com/about>

**A Group of Mad
Scientists**

**Paparazzi Spotting
a Celebrity**

**League of
Superheroes**

A Royal Family

A Singing Choir

Circus Troupe

Ballerinas

Popular Boy Band

Crowd of Protestors

Family of Spies

Step 1: Write down your lyrics!

* Jot down key themes and ideas here.



Step 2: Use the empty space above to brainstorm key ideas and themes in the music, lyrics, or poem you selected. Fill the page!*

Step 3: Circle five key themes. Use markers or highlighters if necessary to keep things organized!

Step 4: Write a monologue in prose that captures the main themes from the writer's perspective. Use the back of this page if necessary.

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

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

STATEMENT #1: Digging up memories of the past is too painful; it's not worth it.			
SA	A	D	SD
Explain your answer with an example:			

STATEMENT #2: Being gifted or talented makes you more valuable in society.			
SA	A	D	SD
Explain your answer with an example:			

STATEMENT #3: It is disrespectful to tell someone else's story.			
SA	A	D	SD
Explain your answer with an example:			

STATEMENT #4: Times change, but people never change.			
SA	A	D	SD
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.

JUBILEE CRITICAL REVIEW

Directions: Imagine you are the official theatre critic for this production at ASF! For each area of the production, provide 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? Explain.