A companion guide to the Literature to Life production of

Black Boy
By Richard Wright
ABOUT THE WORLD OF BLACK BOY

The Book  Published in 1945
The Author  Richard Wright (1908-1960)
The Context  Timeline of Historical Events
The Actor  Tarantino Smith

Overview of Black Boy
Biography
Civil Rights Movement Timeline
LTL Company

PRE SHOW ACTIVITIES

Who is Richard Wright?  Biography: Building interview questions
Civil Rights Movement Research  History: Social, Cultural and Political Context
Judging a Book by its Cover  Understanding Visual and Oral Information

POST SHOW ACTIVITIES

Have I Got a Thought for You!  Analyzing Themes
Status Role Play  Social Status
Alphabet Race  Themes, Ideas, Emotions, and Context

KEEP EXPLORING

More ways to engage with your LTL performance!
PRE AND POST-SHOW ACTIVITIES

The following activities are recommended to be used as preparation and reflection before and/or after seeing the Literature to Life performance of *Black Boy* by Richard Wright.

Our Teacher Resource Guides are designed for adaptation and flexibility in response to the teachers' needs. We have attempted to create enough variety to address different styles of learning and exploring. It is our hope that our guides provide insight and inspiration for teachers and students to explore texts from a theatrical perspective.

The time noted for each activity is approximate - please use the activities as they best fit within your classroom.

All Literature to Life resource guides are developed in collaboration with our Teaching Artists. We encourage teachers using our resource guides to reach out to us at info@literaturetolife.org to further discuss the material and collaborate in the shaping of your own exploration in the classroom. Think of us as a layer of support for you and your students.

“If this country can't find its way down a Human path, if it can't inform conduct with a deep sense of life... then all of us, Black as well as White, are heading down the same drain.”

*Black Boy*
Students will learn about Richard Wright’s life and write interview questions based on the information they learn.

MATERIALS
• Biography of Richard Wright
• Link to Discussion Questions
• Large Post-It (optional)

INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS)

Review Vocabulary
Build a class vocabulary list beginning with a discussion of the terms “communism” and “sharecropping.”
5 min

Read
Read the biography of Richard Wright (link above) and discuss the information as a group. Encourage students to look at the language used in the biography and tease out the meaning of the terms used.
15 min

Discuss
Break up the class into small groups and ask each group to use the Discussion Questions document (link above) to further discuss Richard Wright’s life and create a list of questions they have about the author.
15 min

Brainstorm
Build a comprehensive list of additional questions that your class has about Richard Wright’s life. Post these on the board or a large Post-It.
15 min

EXTENSION: HOT SEAT
Ask a student to volunteer to play Richard Wright. Set up a “hot seat” activity, where students ask questions of Mr. Wright and, with the help of the class, the student will answer some of the questions generated from the group discussions.
Students will gain a greater understanding of the social, cultural, and political context of the time period in which the novel *Black Boy* was written. Students will present research-based information to the class.

**MATERIALS**

- Civil Rights Movement Timeline
- Computers or other resources for further research

**INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS)**

*This activity is broken up into two class sessions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Review</th>
<th>15 min</th>
<th>Share the Civil Rights Movement Timeline (link above) with students and review the events listed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Select &amp; Research</td>
<td>Flexible - begin in class and/or complete as homework</td>
<td>Have each student pick one event on the timeline on which to do further research. Students can use the internet or other sources and should take notes on what information they find.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>30 min</td>
<td>In small groups, ask students to present their research and discuss similarities between each event in terms of themes, actions, responses, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect</td>
<td>20 min</td>
<td>Return to the larger group and share discoveries of shared themes.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**EXTENSION: VISUAL REPRESENTATION**

With the knowledge gained through research and reflection of the Civil Rights Movement, build a group mural to show your collective understanding of the themes you discussed.

*Suggested Murals: A Timeline, an Abstract Painting, a Representational mural, etc.*
Students will discuss their expectations of *Black Boy* by looking at the words and images on the book’s cover. Students will explore why publishers may have chosen these particular words and images.

**MATERIALS**

- A copy of the novel *Black Boy*
- Large pieces of paper or newsprint for brainstorming

**INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS)**

**Warm-up**
5 min

Have students brainstorm a list of the types of characters, situations, emotions, themes, locations, and images they think might be included in a play entitled *Black Boy*. Write the list on the paper/newsprint and post it in your classroom.

**Look & Consider**
10 min

Bring in a copy of Richard Wright’s book *Black Boy*. Ask the students to look at the cover of the book and silently consider the following questions:

- Is there a picture or image on the cover? What function do those images have?
- What about the colors on the cover? What do the colors mean and why were they chosen?
- What words did the publishers choose to put on the cover?
- What font is used for the title of the book? What other words or phrases are on the cover?
- Are there images and words on the back cover?

**Write**
15 min

Have students free write with the following prompt: What do you think of the cover of this book? Do the images invite you to pick up the book? Are you more likely to buy a book based on images or words used on the cover? Why do you think Mr. Wright chose this title?

Invite class to add prompting questions of their own to the newsprint or board.

**Discuss**
15 min

After students have had time to think and write about the questions above, gather as a group and discuss their ideas. Look at the list you created at the beginning of class - are there any ideas you want to add, remove, or change?

**EXTENSION**

After seeing the performance, ask the students to create a poster or book cover for *Black Boy*. They can cut images out of magazines and newspapers or draw them. As a class, discuss what words and images they chose to include and why?
Students will analyze themes from the novel/play *Black Boy* and support their ideas with evidence from the book, the Literature to Life presentation, and their own lives.

The following questions represent an array of perspectives that can be used as either discussion or essay topics. Treat them as invitations to discuss directly, or on paper, and further explore the context of *Black Boy* and its resonance to you today.

**Voiceless today**
Richard Wright said that one of the reasons he wrote *Black Boy* was to “lend his tongue to the voiceless Negro boys of the South.” Who do you consider to be voiceless in today’s society? Who is “lending their tongue” for the voiceless of today?

**Books and more**
Richard Wright says, “I hunger for books, for new ways of looking and seeing.” What books have given you a new way to look at and see the world? What other life experiences have expanded your thoughts about the world?

**Different and same**
If Richard Wright were alive today, do you think he would be encouraged or discouraged about the changes in our country? How is life in your community today different from the racial situation in the South in the early 1900’s? How is it similar?

**Words as weapons**
When Richard Wright first reads H.L. Mencken, he is astonished by the writing style. He says, “This man is fighting, fighting with words. He uses words as a weapon, uses them like a club. Can words be weapons?” Discuss words as weapons. Have you experienced the positive impact of words in your own life? Have you experienced the destructive power of words in your own life?

**Music in it**
Ralph Ellison compares *Black Boy* to blues music. Ellison believes that the attraction of the blues is that “they express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit.” Discuss this, and then write a blues song based on Richard Wright’s life or an event in your own life. Try telling the same story in a different musical style, e.g. hip hop, opera, etc.

**Theatrically so**
How did seeing a live theatre performance contribute to your experience of *Black Boy*? How would it have differed if you had seen a movie version? Were there any additional scenes from the book, *Black Boy*, that you would have liked included in the Literature to Life performance?

**Hunger**
What do you hunger for in your life?
Students gain an understanding of social status. Students relate the exercise to Richard Wright’s experience of race and class as evidenced in his novel *Black Boy*.

**MATERIALS**

- One deck of cards (or computer print-outs of them)
- Safety pins or tape

**INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explain</strong></td>
<td>5 min</td>
<td>Explain that the playing cards represent <em>characters</em> with different status levels. (Example: Face cards are royalty, 8-10 are high society, 5-7 are middle class, 2-4 are servants and the Ace is a street person)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pin/Tape</strong></td>
<td>5 min</td>
<td>Each student has a card pinned to his/her back. They do not know what card.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Circulate</strong></td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>Students circulate the room as if at a party. They relate to the other characters based on their status level. (Example: If talking to a servant, the student might request a drink of water. If talking to royalty, the student might request an autograph.) Each student will try to <em>silently</em> determine his or her own status based on their classmates’ reactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sort</strong></td>
<td>10 min</td>
<td>Have the students silently line up from highest to lowest status based on how others treated them during the party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reveal</strong></td>
<td>15 min</td>
<td>Reveal each card, and compare how the students lined themselves up against the actual order of the cards. Discuss why they made the choices that they did based on their behavior toward each other.</td>
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**EXTENSION**

From *Black Boy*: “It was simply utterly impossible for me to calculate, to scheme, to act, to plot all the time. I would remember to dissemble for short periods, then I would forget and act straight and human again, not with the desire to harm anybody, but merely forgetting the artificial status of race and class. It was the same with whites as with blacks; it was my way with everybody.”

Take turns delivering this quote to the group. Listen to the meaning each voice brings to the quote. After, *discuss* the status of race and class in *Black Boy*. Does status play a role in your life? How?
The students will brainstorm ideas, themes, emotions, and contexts from the novel/play of *Black Boy*.

**MATERIALS**

- 2 Large pieces of paper or large Post-It listing letters from A to Z
- Bell or other ringing instrument (optional)

**INSTRUCTIONS (STEPS)**

**Divide**
- Participants are split into two (2) teams. Each group lines up behind a poster board which lists the letters from A through Z.

**Start with an A-**
- **Warm-up**
  - The first individual in line is asked to write one word that starts with “A” that captures a theme, feeling, idea, adjective, verb, or any word that comes to mind regarding *Black Boy* (you can limit the categories based on the level of your students). Use this first round as a clarifying moment - other students can assist in brainstorming.

**From B to Z**
- **The participant then hands the marker to the person behind him/her, who does the same for the letter “B” and so on until “Z.”**
  - *Every participant should be involved and write a word in turn, but can also ask the group for help if he/she cannot think of a word.*

**Race**
- The first group to finish wins.

**Agree to Disagree**
- **5 min**
  - When both groups complete the alphabet, they are asked to look at each other’s words and circle the ones they disagree with.

**Round Robin Debate**
- **20 min**
  - Stage a Round Robin Debate where students have a minute each to explain why they agree/disagree with a chosen word being listed. The teacher or a student is assigned as an immediate judge and rings in favor of an “instant winner.” Another student keeps score on the board. The debate should be as playful as it is sincere.

**EXTENSION**

Keep the list posted in your classroom and revisit it every so often to decide if there are new words you can add as you learn more about the characters, settings, etc. in the story.
Here are a few more ideas about how you can encourage your students to reflect on the play. We would love to have copies of some of the writings or artwork your students create! Please email your reflective works to info@literaturetolife.org.

SUGGESTED WRITTEN WORK

CRITIQUE THE PERFORMANCE: Imagine that you are the theatre critic for a major publication. Your job is to attend performances and review them for the public. You have your own column and byline, and you have been asked to write a review of *Black Boy*.

Read
Before starting, read reviews of theatre productions in local newspapers or online. Cut out/print those that interest you and bring them to class. Note the writing style the critic uses as well as the content as you discuss the checklist.

Gather
Gather all of the necessary information:
- the name of the theatre
- the names of the actor, director, writer, playwright, and education facilitators
- the date you attended
- your thoughts about the performance

Outline
What do you want to tell your readers about this play?
What were some of the most memorable moments in the play?
- What moments surprised you?
- Was the actor believable or not believable?
- How suitable is the play for young audiences?
- Does it strike a chord with realities that youth face today?
Would you recommend the play, or not?
On a scale of one to five, five being highest, what rating will you give the play?

Write then Rewrite
Decide how you wish to organize the material, sketch out your review and begin writing. After completing the first draft, read the review to yourself. Evaluate the choices you made in terms of content, style, and tone. Writing is synonymous with revising, so make any changes that will strengthen your writing. Upon making changes, begin writing a second draft. Again, read to yourself for possible revisions. Type or neatly print your final version in the form of a newspaper review column.

Present
Try presenting your review in an different format! You can try:
- an infographic
- a podcast show
- an article
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