

# Biddy Mason

## Enrichment Works

### Our Mission

Enrichment Works creates and presents theater to inspire learning.

## Classroom Connections

### Synopsis

In the assembly program “Biddy Mason: From Slavery to Riches in the Wild West,” an African-American woman Biddy Mason tells her life story to a judge while petitioning for freedom from slavery. Students learn about her arduous, seven-month journey from Mississippi to California on foot. An accomplished midwife and nurse, Biddy learns that California has abolished slavery and petitions to be freed. She wins her freedom, and through her hard work and intelligence, Biddy becomes a wealthy and well-respected member of the community. Her story is a testament to her character and spirit. Throughout the program, students learn about the life of an important and influential woman in 1800s California.



Biddy Mason

### About the Artists

**Joyce Lee** (actor) has almost 30 years of experience in arts education as educator, performer and administrator. She has an MFA from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and has designed and conducted professional development workshops for Lincoln Center Institute in New York. She's also served as a resident professional teaching associate at Cornell University in Ithica. She's a long-standing member of both SAG-AFTRA and Actor's Equity and is a lifetime member of the Actor's Studio. She teaches Voice and Speech at the International Academy of Film and Television in Burbank, and acts in film, TV and theatre throughout the world.

**Lily Landers** (playwright) received a Master's Degree in the Sociology of Education from New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development in 2007. She has since developed her own musical yoga program that she teaches to students in Los Angeles schools. Lily enjoys writing stories and songs for a young audience and she is pleased to have her first play produced by Enrichment Works.

**Murphy Cross** (director) is a Broadway alumna of *A Chorus Line*, *Pal Joey*, *Bubbling Brown Sugar* and *Division Street* (with John Lithgow). Along with partner Paul Kreppel, she conceived, directed and produced the Tony-winning Broadway show, *Jay Johnson: The Two and Only* and produced the off-Broadway production of *The Big Voice: God or Merman*. She has directed *Sunday's Children All Fall Down*, *Blinders* and *The Magic Feather* (both featured in Samuel French Short Play Festivals). She has choreographed for such stars as John Travolta, Debbie Reynolds, Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore. Murphy has extensive television credits as an actress including *Numbers*, *Cheers*, *Night Court*, *Family Law*, and *Taxi*, where she played Louie's blind date.

## Discussion and Writing Questions

- How would you feel if you had to walk across the country? What would be the biggest challenge?
- If you were the Judge hearing Ms. Mason's story, what would you have decided?
- What were some of the challenges that Bidy Mason had to overcome before she became a successful businesswoman?
- Why do you think Ms. Mason decided to support other people in her community and beyond?
- Name some important women in California and beyond. How have opportunities changed since Bidy Mason lived in California for women?

## Vocabulary Words

Midwife  
Petition  
Philanthropist  
Plantation  
Slavery  
Spirituals  
Testimony  
Volition

## Project Ideas

- Research other accomplished women from Los Angeles. Select one and write a short obituary (a short article about a person after they have died) describing their life story.
- Find or draw a basic map of the United States. Locate the states (Georgia, South Carolina, Mississippi, Utah, and California) where Ms. Mason lived and worked, and highlight the key events in her life at each location.
- Research the land the Bidy Mason owned in Los Angeles. What was on the property then? What is there now?
- Research the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Los Angeles which Ms. Mason helped to establish in Los Angeles and trace its history through today with a timeline or graphic organizer.

## Resources

### Websites

- African Americans and the Early Pueblo of Los Angeles  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20130404004547/http://www.ci.la.ca.us/el/elphis6.htm>
- California African American Museum – Who Was Bidy Mason?  
[https://www.caamuseum.org/documents/bidy\\_mason.pdf](https://www.caamuseum.org/documents/bidy_mason.pdf)
- Slavery and the Making of America by PBS  
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/>
- Bidy Mason's Place: A Passage of Time  
[http://www.publicartinla.com/Downtown/Broadway/Bidy\\_Mason/](http://www.publicartinla.com/Downtown/Broadway/Bidy_Mason/)
- Short List of Notable Women in Los Angeles  
<http://www.laalmanac.com/people/pe05.htm>

### Booklist

- Dear America: A Picture of Freedom by Patricia C. McKissack
- Heart and Soul: The Story of America and African Americans by Kadir Nelson
- With Open Hands: A Story About Bidy Mason by Jeri Chase Ferris
- Black Frontiers: A History of African American Heroes in the Old West by Lillian Schlissel

## Contact Us

### Enrichment Works

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## Standards and Learning

Enrichment Works is a theater company whose productions are designed to inspire children to learn by creating an emotional connection to educational subjects. “Biddy Mason: From Slavery to Riches in the Wild West” uses the Theater Content Standards of California to provide a positive theatrical experience. The performer interacts directly with students and asks them questions about the topic of the play.

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## Visual and Performing Arts Connections

### 1.0 Artistic Perception

Students process, analyze and respond to sensory information through language and skills unique to theatre. They learn theatrical vocabulary such as playwright, conflict, setting, script, etc. They analyze the elements of Biddy Mason by identifying the who, what, when, where and why of the story. Students are engaged through direct address by the actor, scenery, costumes, and stylized movement. The theatre device of flashbacks is used and the audience learns that stories can be told in a non-linear way.

### 2.0 Creative Expression

In Biddy Mason, students learn about important events in American and Californian history such as slavery, emancipation, and the African-American experience. Their creativity is engaged as they trace Biddy Mason’s journey from captivity to success across the United States. Students help create, perform and participate in the performance through interaction with the actor. The entire audience participates at key points during the play to create different moods.

### 3.0 Historical and Cultural Context

“Biddy Mason: From Slavery to Riches in the Wild West” helps students understand the role of theater. They learn about the achievements of a former slave and of Californian history in the 1800s. They learn about a strong woman who overcame great challenges and helped shape Los Angeles.

### 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

Audience interaction throughout the play allows students to maintain a high level of emotional connection to the characters in the play. Following the play, students participate in a Question and Answer session where they can criticize and query the actors/characters about the content of the play or the artistic choices made in this production. Students are given the opportunity to express how they felt as a participating impromptu actor during the performance. Post-performance activities provided through study guides are available to help students understand the character’s journey and events in the play.

### 5.0 Connections, Relationship, Applications

Activities will be provided through Classroom Connection guides in order to encourage students to connect what is learned in Biddy Mason to other subject areas. Through hands-on approaches, including improvisation and dramatization, students can explore concepts in other subject areas (e.g. American history, particularly the period of slavery and emancipation, especially in California) to learn how theatre can communicate content from other sources.