

A Songwriting Lesson from Irving Berlin

Enrichment Works

Our Mission

Enrichment Works creates and presents theater to inspire learning.

Classroom Connections

Synopsis

The year is 1947 and Berlin has been up all night writing the music for “Annie Get Your Gun.” In the morning his new assistant arrives (the audience) and Irving reminisces about his life. He shares that he was only a kid when his family left Russia for America, and lived on Manhattan’s poverty stricken Lower East side. He explains how hard work and perseverance paid off. From singing on the streets for spare change, to “plugging” songs in vaudeville houses, to selling his own songs to music publishers on “Tin Pan Alley.” Before he knows it he is teaching his assistant how to make a lot of money by writing hit songs. The lesson

includes nine points: 1) write the melody within the range of most singers; 2) repeat the catchy title in the song; 3) write a song that makes sense sung by either males or females; 4) write from the heart, not the brain; 5) be original; 6), write about nature, like trees and blue skies; 7) write open vowels that are easy to sing; 8) keep it simple; and 9) work hard. Berlin entertains his assistant with some of his most popular songs and the stories behind their creation. These include “God Bless America,” “Blue Skies,” and “White Christmas.”

This performance is presented by Special Arrangement with the Rogers and Hammerstein Organization on behalf of the Estate of Irving Berlin.



Dan Belzer as Irving Berlin

About the Artists

Dan Belzer (BFA, MA) (Irving Berlin) has enjoyed a diverse career as an actor, singer, pianist and teacher. As a member of the UCLA Ray Bolger Theater Project faculty he has music directed, accompanied and conducted several musicals including Rent, Cabaret, Anything Goes, Hot Mikado, and Urinetown in addition to his work as a voice teacher. He has appeared in film and television, working with Academy Award winning directors John Carpenter and Dean Parisot, and he has been seen in national commercials and print campaigns including Equal, Infiniti Automobiles, Sprint, AT&T, Toyota, and Michelob Beer.

Abraham Tetenbaum (Writer/Director) holds a BS from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University and an MFA in Playwriting from the University of Minnesota. Mr. Tetenbaum has written for Broadway (“Crazy He Calls Me”), network television (“Sisters”) and scripted two pilot education projects for the Joy2learn Foundation. He is currently the Editor of Publications for the American Film Institute. Mr. Tetenbaum is a member of the Dramatists Guild (DG) and the Writers Guild of America, West, Inc. (WGA).

Discussion and Writing Questions

- What are some of your favorite songs? Why do you like them? What makes a song a good song?
- Where have you heard "God Bless America?" Why do you think so many of us know that song? Why is it an important song?
- What do you think people found appealing about Irving Berlin songs? What do his songs have in common with each other?

Vocabulary Words

Accompaniment
Chorus
Composer
Harmony
Immigrant
Melody
Rhythm
Tin Pan Alley
Transposing
Vaudeville
Verse

Project Ideas

- Listen to an Irving Berlin song and determine whether or not the songwriter followed his nine rules. Can you write a song following Berlin's rules? (See summary for the list of rules.)
- Irving Berlin was a self-taught musician who only played piano in one key. To overcome this challenge he had a special transposing piano made for him so that he could play his songs in different keys. Think about some challenges you have and imagine an invention that could help you. Draw a picture and write a paragraph describing your idea.
- Irving Berlin moved to America from Russia when he was five years old. His family was very poor and he only went to school for two years. He had to go to work and earn money to help his family. Research other famous immigrants. What struggles did they encounter and what qualities did they have to help them succeed. What challenges do immigrants face today?
- Tin Pan Alley is the name given to the collection of New York City music publishers and songwriters who sold American Popular Music in the late 19th to early 20th century. Visit the library and some websites to learn about Tin Pan Alley and the AMERICAN SOCIETY OF COMPOSERS, AUTHORS, AND PUBLISHERS (ASCAP) which was created for writers and publishers to be paid fairly. Who were the other visionaries, along with Irving Berlin, that worked to make this possible? What obstacles did they encounter?
- Learn about how some visionaries (including Irving Berlin) that worked in Tin Pan Alley worked to create ASCAP so that writers and publishers could be paid fairly. Create two plans, one describing how you would sell a song in Tin Pan Alley and one describing how you would try to sell a song today.

Resources

Websites:

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/berlin.html>
<http://www.rnh.com/irvingberlin>
<http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/playlists/detail/id/10>
http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_605967
<http://www.ascap.com/about/history.aspx>

Booklist:

[As Thousands Cheer: The Life of Irving Berlin](#) by Laurence Bergreen
[The Complete Lyrics of Irving Berlin](#) by Robert Kimball
[God Bless America: The Surprising History of an Iconic Song](#) by Sheryl Kaskowitz
[The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists](#) by Philip Furia

Contact Us

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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. “A Songwriting Lesson from Irving Berlin” 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, inviting students onstage to act out specific roles and events in the story.

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 A Songwriting Lesson from Irving Berlin by identifying the who, what, when, where and why of the story. Students are engaged through direct address by the actor, scenery, costume and music. Students respond to Berlin’s music and are able to analyze the songwriting rules as they are taught and demonstrated.

2.0 Creative Expression

Students observe the actor dramatize Berlin’s life story through the medium of theater, and learn how songs are created. They learn that music can express emotions and national sentiments and that lyrics are created through creative writing. The entire audience participates during the play as the character of Irving Berlin addresses them as though they are his music assistant and encourages their responses.

3.0 Historical and Cultural Context

A Songwriting Lesson from Irving Berlin helps students understand the role of music and theatre. They take part as both spectator and participant as the story unfolds. They learn about the challenges immigrant families faced and about the songwriting and selling business of Tin Pan Alley. They learn that songs can capture the mood of a nation during times of war, struggle and success.

4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

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

5.0 Connections, Relationship, Applications

Activities will be provided through study guides in order to help them encourage students to connect what is learned in A Songwriting Lesson from Irving Berlin to other subject areas. Through hands-on approaches, including songwriting and dramatization, students can explore concepts in other subject areas (e.g. American History (Ellis Island, Tin Pan Alley), Math (meter and rhythm in song) and Science (How does a transposing piano work?) to learn how theatre can communicate content from other sources. Activities encourage students to learn more about the role of an actor, director and writer, and to use their imaginations and creativity to create their own songs and inventions.