

Pushcart Players

STUDY GUIDE



A Note From The Author About This Production of DEAR AMERICA

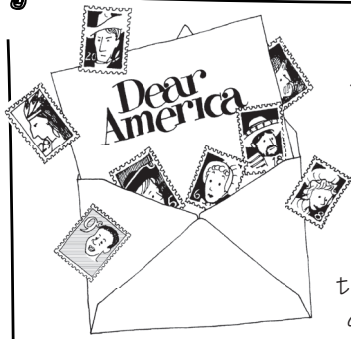
A few weeks after 9/11, my family and I went to Ground Zero. The excursion made several profound impressions. First, of course, was the overwhelming sadness for the devastation of life and landmark architecture. The second was the silence and reverence of the multitude of fellow mourners walking the narrow paths of lower Manhattan. But perhaps the most lasting impression that lingers still is the diversity of Americans who came to pay homage. The face of America is indeed many different colors and so much of America's strength resides in that fact.

In **Dear America** we explore many timely themes including the immigrant experience, ethnic diversity, environmental issues and democratic values. At the heart of each these themes is the consideration of human rights and tolerance - - that is the practice of recognizing and respecting the beliefs and customs of others.

The objective of this study guide is to assist teachers and parents in expanding and reinforcing the concepts of tolerance and respect for ourselves and others through the viewing of our play, **Dear America**, and through projects, discussion, further reading and other excellent suggested resources.

In researching and selecting material for this presentation, we had to make some difficult choices. There are so many rich stories and ethnic heritages to be explored and presented that we could include only the smallest of samplings. It is our hope that you will use these stories as a springboard for investigating the myriad of cultures and customs that provide the rich and colorful character of America. And as you watch the play, we hope you will feel the same surge of unity and pride as we do each time we come to the final lyrics and sing "from the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans, white with foam. God bless America! My home . . . sweet home! God bless America! My home . . . sweet home!"

Ruth Fost



A SUMMARY

The story of **DEAR AMERICA** begins with the arrival of Trudy Volinski at the home of relatives in New York in July of 1946. Having survived the War in Europe, her appreciation of the blessings of freedom and democracy in the United States is profound. As a violinist, she

quickly obtains a job with a traveling orchestra, giving her the opportunity to see different parts of the country and to know, firsthand, the backgrounds, customs and contributions of some of the ethnic groups that are, indeed, the mosaic of America.

As Aunt Trudy travels she meets, among others, the great nephew of Native American Chief Seattle, the great granddaughter of a Scandinavian Homesteader, a Latino family celebrating Cinco de Mayo, Civil Rights activist Reverend Brown and his young daughter, Linda.

Each family has a fascinating story to tell and Trudy writes about them in letters to her young niece, Anya. Pieced together, her correspondence provides a stunning overview of America's recent past. Each letter is a little story unto itself - - sometimes funny, sometimes sad - - but always compelling, well informed and conscious of the promise and hope that America offers its citizens.

In presenting the heartbeat of the country through its people and their music, **DEAR AMERICA** celebrates cultural diversity and the triumph of the human spirit.



OPENING

A musical overture and visually playful opening number introduce the characters and cultures that young audiences will meet during the course of the play.

AUNT TRUDY'S FIRST LETTER AND ARRIVAL IN THE U.S.

Aunt Trudy's first letter tells her family in America the story of how she survived the War in Europe. Papa gently explains the circumstances of Nazi Germany to 7-year-old Anya. Aunt Trudy's arrival in NY in 1946 is a moment of great joy and celebration.

FOR DISCUSSION:

Some aspects of history are painful to remember.

- Why, in your opinion, do we want to know about the past?
- What can we do with that information to try to make the world a better place?
- What can we do as individuals to keep the bad parts of history from ever happening again?

Here are some terms you may want to look up and discuss:

Prejudice	Anti-Semitism	Bias
Racism	Scape-goating	Intolerance

- What do you think causes people to have the kinds of feelings described by those words?
- What do you think we can do to change or prevent these kinds of feelings?
- Why do you think Aunt Trudy was so happy to arrive in America?
- What special meaning did America have for her after her experiences in Nazi Germany?
- If you could pick just one color (or just one musical instrument) to describe The Holocaust, which one would it be? Explain why.
- Draw a picture or design showing your feelings about the Holocaust, using just that color.
- Or imagine a melody played by the instrument you chose.
- Describe how it makes you feel to a friend or partner in your class.

What do you think it might feel like to have to hide or escape from someplace or someone who decides you have no rights because you practice a certain religion or your skin is a certain color?

- Write a short story or poem about those feelings.
- What color or musical instrument would you choose for Aunt Trudy's arrival in New York? Why?
- How is it different from the Holocaust color or instrument?

Write a short story or poem beginning with the sentence, "Freedom is precious because . . ."

Note to parents and teachers: For very young children, read **The Number on My Grandfather's Arm** by David Adler and **Remember Not To Forget** by Norman H. Finkelstein (see Bibliography). These will provide excellent information about the Holocaust for those of you who wish to introduce this part of history. Toward the same end, David Adler's **We Remember the Holocaust** and Barbara Rogasky's **Smoke and Ashes** provide excellent reading for students from grade 5 thru 9. The Bibliography also includes many other excellent books on the subject.

THE FOURTH OF JULY

Aunt Trudy arrives in New York on the Fourth Of July. Anya invites her to see the oom-pahs, Uncle Sam and marching bands at the parade. It is a fun and festive celebration of the Declaration of Independence, the foundation for a free, democratic government in America. The Declaration of Independence, of course, is also an inspiration for people in many other countries who long to be free.



FOR DISCUSSION:

- Discuss the special significance of the Fourth of July for someone like Aunt Trudy.
- For all Americans.

Discuss the meaning of a symbol.

- What are some of the symbols you think of when you think of July 4th?
- Draw a picture of one of those symbols (i.e. Liberty Bell, Fire Works, American Flag, Uncle Sam, etc.)
- What do symbols do to help connect us to and understand our heritage?
- Design a poster or flier announcing a July 4th activity in your school or town. Draw a picture illustrating a July 4th parade or celebration.

An excellent book on the subject of the Fourth of July is **Fireworks, Picnics and Flags. The Story of Fourth of July Symbols** by James Cross Giblin (see Bibliography).

THE STORY OF CHIEF SEATTLE AND THE SUQUAMISH TRIBE



Aunt Trudy meets the great nephew of Chief Seattle in Omaha, Nebraska. He tells her the story of his ancestors, the Suquamish Tribe, who once lived happily off the land on the Great Plains. Until one day, a cattle rancher came and claimed some of the land. Then came sheep ranchers and then homesteaders. They destroyed the Buffalo, the source of life for Native Americans, and broke promises regarding the use of the land. Defeated and sad, Native Americans were forced to live in restricted areas called reservations and to adapt to Euro-American life-styles. Aunt Trudy writes, "This is a sad chapter in American History, but perhaps we can still learn from this great civilization."

FOR DISCUSSION

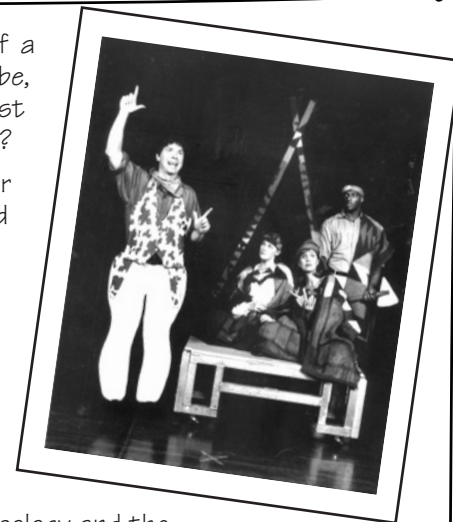
- If you could re-write history, how would you write the chapters between Native Americans and New Americans?
- At the time Columbus arrived in San Salvador.
- When Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock.
- When America was expanding westward in the 19th century.
- Today.

Native Americans believed that the earth, like the sun, sky, clouds and wind, are part of nature for man and animals to use and respect. New Americans believed that land could be claimed, owned, bought and sold.

- Discuss this basic cultural difference between Native Americans and New Americans.
- Why would this present a problem or conflict between the two cultures?



- If you were chief of a Native American Tribe, what would you suggest to solve the problem?
- If you were a rancher or farmer, what would you do?
- If you were a leader of New Americans in the 19th Century, what are some ideas you might come up with to solve the problem?



Today we think about ecology and the environment a lot. What happened to the land and the air and the animals in this country in the last 150 years?

- Discuss hunting Buffalo for food, clothing, tools and shelter, as opposed to slaughter of Buffalo for sport.
- What can we learn from the Native American Civilization's relationship and respect for nature?
- After looking at pictures and perhaps reading about their life and life-style, find materials around your home and classroom to make a model of a Native American settlement.

Note to Teachers: It may be interesting to have different groups within the class assigned to illustrate or make models of different tribes. There are endless variations of housing, clothing, agriculture, etc. depending on what area of the country the tribe chosen to illustrate is located. You might extend the project to include research and presentations of their food, language, music, dance and other customs.

An excellent book with marvelous illustrations for young readers is **Brother Eagle, Sister Sky** by Susan Jeffers (See Bibliography).

Write a poem beginning with the sentence, "The earth is sacred because . . ."

EUROPEANS BECOME HOMESTEADERS IN THE 1840'S

Aunt Trudy's orchestra travels on to South Dakota. She attends a square dance and meets a woman named Christina, whose Grandma was Homesteader from Scandinavia. Christina tells Trudy the story of why and how her grandparents left their home and came to the western part of the United States. Within the story we see Christina's grandparents parting with their family in Norway, driven by the hope of a better life for their children. They arrive in America, make a perilous journey west by covered wagon and meet homesteader Frank Boler who (in a humorous song) introduces them to the challenges of barren land, terrible weather and less than perfect living conditions on their government claim.



FOR DISCUSSION

Try to imagine leaving friends, family and most of your possessions to move to a far away land.

- What conditions would make you do this?
- What would you be hoping for in the new land?

Imagine that you are in a family like Grandma Christina's and you are told that you will be packing up to go to another country.

- What would you take with you in your satchel. Why?
- Write a letter to the family you left behind describing your journey.

Grandma Christina's Mama gave her a locket and said to her, "This is to remind you to always remember who you are and where you come from. It will help you to know where you are going."

- What do you think she meant by those words?
- Is there something you own or in your home that once belonged to your grandparents or great grandparents?
- What is meaningful about that or those items?
- Write a short story or play with the title, **The Family Heirloom.**
- Interview a parent, grandparent, relative or neighbor who came to America from another country.
- You may want to find out when they came, how old they were, why they came, what was easy and what was difficult, what were their hopes and dreams, etc.
- Write a newspaper or magazine article from the interview.

To find an audience for this exercise, you might "publish" an "Immigrant Experience" or "Ethnic Heritages" Magazine or Booklet by compiling the students' interviews. This could also be an on-going project with monthly or bi-monthly issues. Use the exercise to develop computer skills and layout and design techniques as well.

- Create a patchwork quilt entitled "Heritage" by having each student create a picture or design representing the part of the world from which he /she or his/her ancestors came. This can be done with fabric or by drawing on squares of paper and making a paper reproduction of a quilt.



- Plan an international festival in which students share foods, costumes/clothing, musical instruments, music, art work, crafts, designs and other significant aspects of their heritage.



CINCO DE MAYO

While in Tucson, Arizona, Aunt Trudy visits the family of Roberto, (Anya and Papa's friend and neighbor in NY). They are warm and loving and invite Aunt Trudy to stay for Cinco de Mayo, a day commemorating Mexican victory over the French in 1862 against great odds at the Battle of Puebla. Cinco de Mayo today is an opportunity for Mexican-Americans to celebrate and share traditions with friends of different heritages.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Why do you think it is important to know about and have pride in our heritage?
- Why do you think it is important to know about the heritage of others?
- What are some of the similarities in the celebration of Cinco de Mayo and the Fourth of July?
- What are some of the differences?

Consider other festivals or customs of Hispanic and other origins.

- Write a short story (or draw a picture) describing a festival or custom of your heritage.
- How is it the same or similar to other customs and festivals?
- How is it different?

- Write a poem or short story or song beginning with the sentence, "I am proud of my heritage because—"

There is something unique and special in each of our origins and traditions. Can you imagine an orchestra or band in which everyone played just one note on the same instrument? Can you imagine a rainbow that only had one color?

- Draw a picture or write a poem or story about a world in which everyone looks exactly the same, wears the same color, eats the same food, etc.
- Now draw a picture (or write a poem or story) about a diverse world.
- What are some things we can learn from each other?

- Three excellent books to consider are **Kids Explore America's Hispanic Heritage**, by Westridge Young Writers Workshop and **Positively Different, Creating a Bias-Free Environment for Young Children** (See Bibliography).

“SEPARATE BUT EQUAL” CHALLENGE IN TOPEKA, KANSAS and THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Aunt Trudy's little orchestra has moved on to the deep south. In Topeka, Kansas, she meets a family with a young daughter, Linda, who reminds her of Anya. But the opportunities, educationally and otherwise, available to Anya are not available to Linda because, as an African-American she is subject to the “Separate But Equal” law. Linda's father, Reverend Brown, is an activist in the effort to change the law. He invites Aunt Trudy to a meeting which she attends and becomes a part of what eventually became known as “The Civil Rights Movement.”



These are big words and represent big issues, but understanding their meaning is a first, big step towards reducing bias in the classroom and in society.

- What do you think might cause someone to judge someone else because of the way they look, their sex or their religion?
- What do you think we can do to help ourselves and others learn to understand, accept and respect one another, regardless of race, sex or religion?

FINALE

In the final scene of the play, Anya, now a young adult with a family of her own, tells us the outcome of Aunt Trudy's work in the Civil Rights Movement. She also recalls the wisdom and inspiration of Aunt Trudy's stories about the people she met in her travels throughout the country. A stirring finale reviews the strength, promise and hope of ethnic diversity in America, dear America.

FOR DISCUSSION

The Supreme Court eventually ruled that “Separate but equal” is not fair and discriminates against (rejects the rights of) certain people because of color or race.

- What is wrong with rejecting anyone's rights for any reason?
- How does denying someone their rights affect or threaten the rights of others?

Some words that might be helpful to define and discuss are:

prejudice
discrimination
culture
ethnic group
racism
sexism
stereotyping



LITERACY IN THE ARTS ACTIVITIES

Background information can be enormously effective in the understanding and appreciation of any subject. The more we know, the greater our potential involvement. A brief discussion of theatre and theatre terms, what students might expect to see, hear and even “feel,” things to look for or think about, will undoubtedly enhance the theatre experience.

You might begin with a discussion of the differences between television programs, movies and live theatre. Discuss the fact that a theatre performance is recreated each time it is performed and is affected to some extent by the presence and response of each audience. There is energy felt by actors from audience and audience from actors, and the forthcoming performance in your school or theatre is being recreated especially for your students.

Familiarity with some of the elements of theatre and theatre terms will also be helpful.

Please help us know how you and your students felt about our production by filling out the Evaluation Form on our Website (www.pushcartplayers.org), by writing us at:

Pushcart Players
197 Bloomfield Avenue • Verona, NJ 07044

or

email: information@pushcartplayers.org

We would also love to hear stories, anecdotes and/or successful projects done in connection with our presentation of “Dear America” or your school or classroom focus on diversity and tolerance.

A partial list which you may want to define and discuss in terms of how they are used, how they affect the play, and so on, is as follows:

Stage	Curtain(s)	Wing space
Actors	Director	Choreographer
Musicians	Technicians	Stage Manager
Scenery	Costumes	Props
Lights	Sound	Music
Script	Score	Dialogue
Playwright	Composer	Designer
Comedy	Tragedy	Mystery
Imagination	Vision	Creation

You may want to modify or add to this list, depending on the grade level and prior theatre experience of your students. There are many other ways in which this somewhat daunting collection of terms might be brought to life within the classroom. Let the curtain rise on new and imaginative ways to learn about the arts!

SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE AND AFTER THE SHOW

MUSIC AND SOUND

- How did the music help you to know what was happening or how to feel about a scene?
- Compare the music in the overture (opening segment of music) to the music under Aunt Trudy's narrative about her experiences in the War.
- Compare, again, to the music in the July Fourth Parade.
- Listen for sound effects. What did you hear (i.e. birds, ships, marching, crowd sounds, clip clop of horses pulling covered wagon, etc.)
- How do sound effects help a scene? Create a radio play on tape in your class room, using sound effects.

COLOR

- What do colors tell us about a scene?
- Compare the colors in the Cinco de Mayo Festival scene to the Civil Rights Movement March.

SCENERY

- There are many ways to create scenery. Sometimes it provides an entire room or street with great detail. Sometimes it is abstract or suggestive, asking the audience to fill in, with their imagination, what is not there. Which choice did Pushcart make in its presentation of scenery? How does scenery help you understand location? Time or period? What else can it help you to know?
- Draw a picture of a scene in a play. Explain how the parts are going to work or be used by the actors.

LIGHTING

- Lighting can also help create a mood for a scene. What kind of lighting would you provide for: A festive parade? A sad story? A war-like scene? A quiet, spiritual gathering?

COSTUMES

- Costumes can also provide information about a character, the time or era, his/her situation (socio-economic, age, etc.). What do we probably know about a character who is wearing a crown? A military hat? A sailor cap? A babushka? An elegant gown? A Native American robe or vest? A cowboy hat? Etc.

CHARACTER

- When we read a book or story, the author tells us where the story takes place and how the characters feel about the events in the story. An actor's job is to make the playwright's story come to life by saying and feeling the playwright's words in a certain way. What do we know if an actor is smiling or laughing? Crying? Cowering or cringing? Walking tall and with pride? Etc. What do we probably know about a character that is jumping rope? That is swinging a lasso? Carrying a rifle? What might we think if we hear a character speak with a German accent? Scandinavian accent? Irish accent? Southern American accent?

NOTE TO TEACHERS: It is our hope that you will use the above list and suggestions as a starting point for the infinite possibilities for discussion and activities/projects related to the viewing and creation of theatre.

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NOTES