

Relevant Unit Objectives

Module 3: African American Community and Culture

This lesson addresses the following Essential Questions:

- How did the existence of slavery shape African American communal life and cultural expression?
- How did acts of resistance shape African American cultural heritage and community?

Objectives of the Lesson

Aim

Why was it important for African Americans to perform in and attend theatrical productions in pre-Civil War New York?

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Evaluate the importance of cultural expression in general and theatrical performance in particular to the African-American community in antebellum New York
- Identify the historical contributions of the African Grove Theater

Introduction

Ask students:

- What assemblies have you gone to in school?
- How many of these assemblies were presented by people you chose to invite to the school?
- Who chooses which acts or entertainment are shown in your school auditorium or gym?

Imagine that you have control over what assemblies are given at your school. Brainstorm a list of assemblies you would like to see shown at your school.

How many grades would share your interest in these topics? Would this list look different if first graders controlled the auditorium?

How would you feel if you had to sit through a performance that the first graders chose for the whole school to watch? Why might you feel like misbehaving?

Instructional Procedures

Step One

Imagine New York in 1821. One out of every five New Yorkers is a person of color. Slavery will not be fully abolished in the state for another six years. There are both freemen and enslaved African Americans living in New York City. If you were to go to a tavern and talk with Black New Yorkers at this time, they would tell you that they would love to see people of color on stage in their city, but they can't because there are no theaters for people of color and no theaters that will put African Americans on the stage.

Step Two

Think back to the list you brainstormed about assemblies with your fellow fourth graders. If you were to ask your new-found friends from 1821 what they would like to see on stage, they might reply "A play by Shakespeare called *Othello*, where the main character is from Africa, or a play based on the true events of a Caribbean island where the slaves rebel against their white masters and take over the island.

- Why do you think Black New Yorkers would want to see these things?
- Why do you think White New Yorkers and theater owners would not like to see these things?

William Henry Brown and James Hewlett opened the African Grove Theater in 1821. Two of the productions were *Othello* and *King Shotaway*. Though the theater was primarily serving New York's African American community, white New Yorkers could pay to see shows too. After a while, the white audience members who did not like what African Americans were doing on stage would pay to sit in the back and behave so badly the police would have to shut down the theater.

The teacher may provide more background information about the African Grove Theater and William Brown found at "African Grove," entry from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Grove

Concluding Discussion

- Why do you think fourth graders aren't allowed to choose which assemblies come to your school?
- Why do you think the African Grove Theater didn't succeed in White New York City?

Materials

"African Grove," entry from wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Grove