

An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

Art and Democracy



- Student Activity: Power and the Arts: Support, Challenge and Question
- Student Activity: Research the Role of Arts in a Democracy
- Post Reprint: “Is it better for the Obamas to support or be visible on the D.C. arts scene?”
- Student Activity: What Is the Best Way for the White House to Support the Arts?
- Post Columnist Reprint: “This government office is trying to shut down nasty and naughty names”
- Student Activity: Explore the Performing Arts in *The Post*
- Student Activity: Write a Theater Review
- Post Review Reprint: “Voices raised ebulliently, passengers of ‘Titanic’ head for the deep”
- Student Activity: Who Should Hold This Office?
- Post Editorial Reprint: “Censorship comes to the U. S. Capitol”

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The *Washington Post* reprints and suggested activities in this resource guide focus on the relation of the fine and performing arts to government and people in power. Funding for the arts and arts organizations is a national, state and local government as well as individual matter. National Endowment for the Arts grants and similar programs come under scrutiny and raise questions of the legitimate role government should play in supporting the arts. At the center of the issue is the value we place on art and artists — and if a society can afford not to support artistic endeavors.

Articles look at the legacy of the Obama administration. This would invite students to read about the new administration’s involvement with people in the arts. The “Explore the Performing Arts in The Post” and “Write a Theatre

Review” seek student engagement and interaction with the arts scene.



“The Power and the Arts” background essay and “Research the Role of the Arts in a Democracy” activity were written by Christopher Janson. He has more than 20 years, of communications, marketing, education and theater experience,

including 17 years working as an Educational Services Representative with *The Washington Post*’s Newspaper in Education program. Chris has also written and produced one-man plays for The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery and The Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming. He is the current producer of the Generation Q New Play Reading Series for D.C.’s fledgling Rainbow Theatre Project.

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Power and the Arts: Support, Challenge and Question

Throughout history and in countries around the world, the arts have been a source of patriotism, a means of education, a celebration of common human values and experiences, as well as inspiration and comfort during difficult times of war and economic depression. Many leaders have realized this and sought to channel public funds to support the arts. At other times, conflict has arisen due to the fact that many artists believe that part of their job is to challenge authority and “speak truth to power,” especially when it comes to defending human rights. Performing artists in the news in 2016 and 2017 have created headlines by using their fame to criticize Donald Trump before he was inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States and have been the targets of Trump’s Twitter retorts.

During many of the greatest eras of performing arts history, the theater, music and opera became symbols of civic pride and prestige for everyday citizens as

well as politicians and monarchs. In Ancient Greece, a city magistrate of Athens would organize the Dionysian theatre festival and choose the playwrights. Actors and prizes were paid from the city’s coffers, and a wealthy citizen, known as the choregos, would pay to train and costume the choruses. Very often, the choregos were motivated, at least in part, by a desire to advance their own personal political ambitions.

The United States and many other nations today take similar pride in their arts, awarding prizes like the Presidential Medal of Freedom to its notable artists, and even appropriating government funds in support of the arts and humanities, although not without occasional controversy, as some would argue that government should not be in the business of funding the arts.

Interestingly, one of the bleakest times in American history turned out to be one of the most prolific for American artists. In 1935, in the middle of the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt created Federal Project Number One, a subdivision of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Under this program, the U.S. government directly employed writers, actors, artists and musicians. Roosevelt’s goal was not only to use public funds to put unemployed artists to work, but also to lift the



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morale of millions of suffering citizens through literature, music, theater and the arts.

During the darkest times in performing arts history — and in some oppressive regimes around the world today — individual artists and arts groups have been banned, suppressed, censored, persecuted, jailed or exiled. In rare cases in history, performing artists actually received special protection from political authorities, empowering them to speak out in their work against some of their more powerful contemporaries. The 17th century French playwright Moliere, for example, was able to satirize very powerful contemporary clergy and members of the royal court only because of the royal patronage he received from King Louis XIV himself.

Outright censorship of artists in the United States is prohibited by the First Amendment to the Constitution, but that does not mean that American artists themselves or their work have not found themselves under attack from powerful political forces. One of the most glaring examples from our recent history came during the McCarthy era of the 1950's when many artists found themselves "blacklisted" by their government as traitors for their real or perceived associations with Communism. In 1990, a group of artist known as the "NEA Four" had their National Endowment for the Arts funding vetoed because several members of Congress found their work to be obscene.

The example of the "NEA Four" brings up the issue of what role

government authorities have in judging whether works of artistic expression are indecent or profane — or simply inappropriate for the public. There are entire government agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) whose role it is to make these kinds of judgments, and, from time to time, cases of high profile artists' battles with the FCC will make the news.

As a new president and administration prepares to assume power, many artists with different political views have begun to speak out and mobilize in opposition, both personally and within the context of their art. This is likely the opening act of a new and interesting chapter in the ongoing interplay between the arts and politics in America.

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Research the Role of Arts in a Democracy

Not everyone agrees. Where is the line to be drawn for American government support of performing and visual arts? Should elementary, middle and high schools offer classes in choral music, band, dance and art? Should organizations, parents and individuals fund public exhibits and performances — let the market place and those with money determine the extent to which the arts are part of community life? How important are the arts to society?

1. What should be the government's role in supporting the arts? In your response include the earliest examples of American government support for the fine arts. Has that function changed through the centuries?
2. Should government agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities decide which arts and artists are worthy of funding or not? Research both agencies to see if you can find a list of criteria used in making funding decisions.
3. Research Federal Project Number One to learn more about the individual artists, musicians and writers who benefitted from this program. Use the result of your research to write an op-ed, Letter to the Editor, or letter to your member of Congress advocating for government funding of programs like this in your community today. Cite ways in which this type of funding might benefit your community.
4. Look for current examples in the news of artists making their political viewpoints known. How are they doing this? Is it through their work itself, in song, dance, visual arts and poetry, or is it through personal statements or protest? How much weight do you give to the political opinion of artists?
5. When a well-known performer makes his or her views known, how do you respond? Listen to or ignore, finding your attitudes influenced or not affected? Should the political, social and cultural points of view of celebrities influence their employment? Should the movies, albums and works of artists be boycotted because of political views? For choice of words, wardrobe or worrisome actions?
6. Look for examples in print, online and broadcast news of artists being honored by the government. How do presidents and members of Congress decide which artists are worthy of such honors or not, and how much do you think an artist's personal political point of view is factored in?
7. Independent groups present awards, too. Such groups include the Kennedy Center (Kennedy Center Honors and Mark Twain Prize for American Humor), the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Oscars or Academy Awards), American Theatre Wing and The Broadway League (Antoinette Perry Award for Excellence in Theatre or Tony Award), theatreWashington (Helen Hayes Award) and The Recording Academy (GRAMMY Award). Who determines the categories and nominees in each? How are the recipients selected? Is recognition determined by an elite group, peers or the public?
8. Consider the question of whether or not censorship exists today in the United States. Whether the judgments are made by The U.S. Supreme Court, a federal agency, or an independent industry review board like the Motion Picture Association of America, some powerful authority decides what is "decent" or "indecent" and which works of art are appropriate for which age groups. What criteria do these organizations use? Look for examples in the news of artists who are pushing back against these authorities.
9. What standards do you use, if any, for evaluating works of art, music performances and dance routines and choreography?
10. What is the definition of propaganda? Is it possible for a work of art to also be a work of propaganda? The word has a negative connotation, but is propaganda always a bad thing? Find examples of art being used as propaganda both in history and in the news.

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ENTERTAINMENT

Is it better for the Obamas to support or be visible on the D.C. arts scene?

BY GEOFF EDGERS

• Originally Published September 2, 2016

They partied with Prince on the South Lawn, freestyled with “Hamilton” star Lin-Manuel Miranda in the Rose Garden, did Al Green at the Apollo and sang Stevie Wonder as carpool karaoke. This was the viral snapshot of the arts during the Obama years, a sometimes surreal, seemingly endless night of the stars.

But after the Obamas leave the White House, and those pop-culture moments drop down the scroll, their arts legacy will face a more rigorous examination. There will be 43 other administrations to contend with, ranging from John Kennedy’s, capable of coaxing the Mona Lisa (on loan) out of France, to Ronald Reagan’s, which established the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities during his first year in office.

It should come as no surprise that where the arts were concerned, the Obamas didn’t just ignore the Pennsylvania Avenue playbook, they wrote their own script. They established dynamic programs and raised considerable money for arts initiatives. They also sometimes



PETER STRAIN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

drifted away from the traditions of the past, which could leave locals frustrated and impatient.

Perhaps their harshest critic would be Wayne Reynolds, the former chairman of Ford’s Theatre.

“They decided early on not to be involved in the local arts scene,” said Reynolds.

That meant being virtually absent from the National Gallery of Art.

(Michelle Obama only made her first NGA visit, a 65-minute photo opportunity with the wife of the prime minister of Singapore, in August. President Obama has yet to poke his head in.) The Obamas also said they were too busy earlier this year to participate in the annual Ford’s fundraiser, an event usually chiseled into the White House calendar. Without the White House,

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CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

First lady Michelle Obama speaks during an event with the cast of the Broadway play “Hamilton” in the State Dining Room of the White House on March 14, 2016.

the nonprofit organization decided to cancel its gala. Reynolds also could not get the Obamas to pay attention to the plight of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which was eventually swallowed up by the NGA.

“This is the nation’s capital,” Reynolds said. “It’s not good enough to go to New York and Broadway and Hollywood and L.A. That’s great, but Washington, D.C., has to be about more than politics and policy. It has to be about culture.”

That’s one side. The other describes the Obamas as ushering in a new era for arts and culture. Most of the

credit, the supporters say, should go to Michelle Obama.

That’s no departure. Typically, the first lady takes the lead on arts issues out of necessity. Consider that George W. Bush, who has famously taken up painting in recent years, simply “didn’t have time to look at anything” while he was president, according to former first lady Laura Bush.

On the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, Michelle Obama launched Turnaround Arts, which brings arts education into poorly performing schools across the

country. The program has been so successful that it will continue even after the Obamas leave the White House, operated out of the Kennedy Center.

White House representatives also provided a long list of events, ranging from appearances at the National Building Museum to speeches at the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles to a ribbon-cutting at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, at which one or both of the Obamas participated.

Michael Kaiser, the former Kennedy Center president, gave the

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Obamas rave reviews for their advocacy. He said it was far more important that President Obama included \$50 million for the arts in 2009’s economic stimulus package than that he attended a Kennedy Center performance.

“We always want our leaders to do things that show a personal engagement with the things we care about, but presidents and first ladies are incredibly busy,” says Kaiser. “They’re presidents of the whole country. They’re not just presidents of Washington, D.C.”

Laura Bush agrees. She was known for her presence at local arts institutions during her husband’s eight years in the White House.

“There are so many cultural institutions and sites that would love for the first lady and president to visit, so you can’t visit all of them,” Bush said. “I don’t think it’s an oversight on their part. It’s just that they went to this one, they didn’t go to the other.”

Bush, during her time in Washington, said her visits to the Renwick Gallery, the Kennedy Center and the National Gallery — official records show her visiting a dozen times over that eight years, although she believes she may have arrived unannounced occasionally — were not about setting an example as first lady. She just loved art and felt lucky to be so close to so much of it.

“I want all Americans to be interested in art, but on the other hand, a lot of it was, ‘I’m right here, I’m right across the street and I’m so pleased to see this show.’ ” Bush said.

She visited the NGA with friends, her daughters and her mother. But she also used it strategically at times, taking then-Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to see “Pompeii and the Roman Villa: Art and Culture around the Bay of Naples” in 2008 and the first lady of Spain, Ana Botella de Aznar, to see a Goya exhibition in 2002.

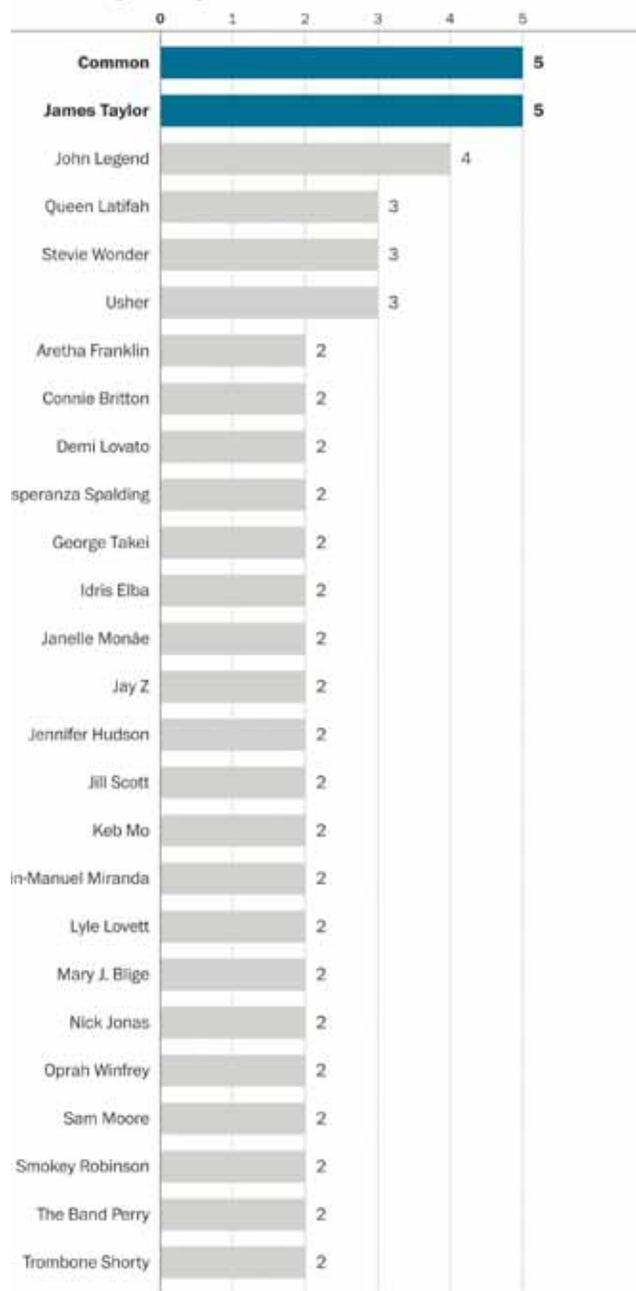
Laura Bush also responded when Ford’s Theatre needed help raising money, personally writing to the Carters, Clintons and George H.W. and Barbara Bush to make sure they offered support.

Obama supporters say the first couple did plenty to promote the arts locally.

The renovation of the White House’s Old Family Dining Room included displaying works by 20th-century artists, among them a piece by the late Alma Thomas, making her the first female African American artist featured

Performers who have visited the Obama White House

Since President Obama took office in 2009, he and first lady Michelle Obama have welcomed hundreds of performers to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Gathered from guest lists at the “In Performance at the White House” series with PBS, 13 state dinners, birthday parties and celebrity social media accounts, here are the artists that have been invited again and again.



Mazy Freeman and Winyan Soo Hoo contributed to this report.

Source: The Washington Post

VERONICA TONEY

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in the building. They attended the groundbreaking of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in 2012, and will return this month to dedicate the new institution.

Obama launched the White House Music Series in 2009, which included programs devoted to everything from classical and country to Motown and Latin music. At a poetry and spoken-word event, in 2009, Lin-Manuel Miranda performed “The Hamilton Mixtape” more than six years before his musical made its Broadway debut.

The Obamas made their mark nationally and internationally, advocating for artist Mark Bradford, who was selected to represent the United States in the Venice Biennale in 2017.

In 2012, the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities launched Turnaround Arts, which has expanded to 68 schools across the country. Artist Chuck Close, a member of the president’s committee, said that Michelle Obama’s involvement was key, whether she was hosting events

at the White House or recruiting high-profile volunteers to participate.

“We wouldn’t have had that kind of success without the bully pulpit,” Close says. “She helped get people like Yo-Yo Ma and Kerry Washington to participate, and we went because not only did we believe in the arts and education and the role of arts education, but because we wanted to hang out with her and see if the administration got it and if they understood what we were doing. She really did get it.”

Mary Schmidt Campbell, the Spelman College president who served as vice chair of the president’s committee, noted the makeup of the group, which included Close, actress Alfre Woodard and dancer Damian Woetzel. These weren’t, she said, big donors being thanked with board posts. These were artists, musicians and theater directors who understood how the arts could improve life. Campbell also said it’s important to remember how the Obamas bridged different parts of culture.

“The collaboration between

Lin-Manuel and [Hamilton biographer] Ronald Chernow is kind of a metaphor for the way I see the Obamas being able to balance this genuine understanding of pop culture with a genuine appreciation for scholarly inquiry,” said Campbell.

If President Obama wasn’t particularly present on the District’s cultural scene during his time in office, there’s always next year. Unlike most former presidents, he and Michelle will remain in town so daughter Sasha can finish high school here.

Laura Bush notes that her husband became interested in art only after leaving the White House. Just recently, the former president was flipping through an art catalogue and stopped to point out a Thomas Moran painting he liked. Laura Bush was amused. She told her husband that the work should have looked familiar. For years, a Moran painting hung outside the treaty room in the White House, a place he went to read his briefings every single night. Now he had time to notice it.



What Is the Best Way for the White House to Support the Arts?

1. Give two examples of the Obamas' failure to be more involved in the local arts scene?
2. Give three examples of the Obamas "ushering in a new era for arts and culture."
3. In what ways did the Bush administration support the arts?
4. What insight into First Lady Michelle Obama's understanding of artists do artist Chuck Close provide and Spelman College Prresident Mary Schmidt Campbell provide?
5. Review the chart that presents performers who have visited the Obama White House. Form a thesis statement about the Obama White House and the Arts. Support the thesis with examples from the chart.
6. In January 2017, Donald Trump begins his term as the 45th president of the United States. If you could advise him on how to be visible on the D.C. arts scene, what would you suggest he do?
7. Many performers turned down invitations to participate in the 2017 inaugural events. In "A new act at inaugural celebration: Partisanship," *Post* reporter Stephanie Merry provided a history of inaugural entertainment:

"For a long time, military bands generally played the ceremony, and an orchestra might provide dance music at the celebration soon after. The modern marriage of celebrity and inauguration began with Franklin D. Roosevelt" and his third inauguration.

 - A. What do you think should be part of the swearing in ceremony in addition to the constitutional requirement for the oaths of office to be administered? Vocalists? Poets? Orchestra or band performances?
 - B. Do you think there should be free concerts or other events before and after the inauguration? Ticketed events to cover the expenses of the inauguration?
8. In what ways could President Donald Trump demonstrate a national support for the arts and artists?
9. Read the pages of the Style section of *The Washington Post* for examples of the Trump family attendance at performances and exhibits. Summerize the type of events they attend.
10. Read the pages of the Style section for examples of inclusion of artists and performers at the White House. At other residences (New York City and Palm Beach) of the Trumps. In what ways are these events reflective of American culture?

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This government office is trying to shut down nasty and naughty names

BY GEORGE WILL

In 1929, Chief Justice William Howard Taft persuaded Congress to finance construction of “a building of dignity and importance” for the Supreme Court. He could not have imagined what the court will ponder during oral arguments this Wednesday. The case concerns the name of an Asian American rock band: The Slants. And surely Taft never read a friend-of-the-court brief as amusing as one filed in this case. It is titled “Brief of the Cato Institute and a Basket of Deplorable People and Organizations.”

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office is empowered, by the “disparagement clause” of a 1946 law, to protect American sensitivities by denying trademark protection to “immoral, deceptive or scandalous” trademarks. These have included those that a substantial portion of a particular group perceives as disparaging that group — an ethnic, religious, national or other cohort. The office has canceled the trademark registrations of entities named Mormon Whiskey, Abort the Republicans, Democrats Shouldn’t Breed, Marriage Is For Fags, and many more.

The Cato/Deplorables brief urges compassionate libertarianism: “This Court should make the jobs of the employees at the ... [Patent and Trademark Office] much easier and put an end to the disparagement clause.” Government officials cannot be trusted to “neutrally” identify speech that disparages. Besides, “disparaging speech has been central to political debate, cultural discourse, and personal identity” throughout American history. The brief notes that a donkey became the Democratic Party’s symbol because someone called Andrew Jackson a “jackass” and he, whose default mode was defiance, put the creature on campaign posters. Entire American professions — e.g., newspaper columnists — exist in part to disparage.

Many rock bands pick names obviously intended to disparage or shock: Dead Kennedys, Dying Fetus, Sex Pistols, etc. Does the title of the best-selling book *Hillbilly Elegy* disparage a group? The Cato/Deplorables brief says: “One of this brief’s authors is a cracker (as distinct from a hillbilly) who grew up near Atlanta, but he wrote this sentence, so we can get away with saying that.” Then comes a footnote: “But he only moved to Atlanta when he was 10 and doesn’t have a Southern accent — and modern Atlanta isn’t really part of the South — so maybe we can’t.” Furthermore, the lead counsel on the brief “is a Russian-Jewish émigré who’s now a dual U.S.-Canadian

Name _____

Date _____

Explore the Performing Arts in *The Post*

Coverage of the performing arts may be found in news articles. Consistently and more often, the performing and visual arts are found in narrative features, lists of venues and programs, and Q&A format in Style and other special sections.

Explore the pages of The Post to find news and feature coverage of the performing arts.

- Arts & Style (Sunday)
 - Critic's Notebook
 - The Guide to the Lively Arts (Sunday)
 - Narrative Feature
 - Q&A
- Style (Monday-Saturday)
- Going Out Guide
- Local Living (Thursday insert)
- Weekend (Friday insert)
- Book World
- Dance
- Movies
- Museums
- Music
- Television
- Theater

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Write a Theater Review

A review of a performance of any type — a play, a ballet, an opera, a choral or orchestra concert or any other type of live “performance piece” — should inform the reader and present a clear evaluation. As the reviewer, you will use your knowledge of and experience with the medium to write your critique.

As any news reporter would, the reviewer states the Who, What, Where, When, Why and How of the performance. You want to provide details that form the foundation for understanding the experience. This includes the name of the composer or playwright, when the work was written and its genre. What range of pieces is on the program? Who choreographed the performance or conducted the orchestra. For a play review, a short synopsis of what the play is about is included, leaving out details that might reveal any important plot twist or surprise revelation or conclusion (sometimes called “spoilers”).

Let's review guidelines for writing a theater (also spelled “theatre”) review.

We will begin with elements that might be called the more Objective details.

- Who is the playwright? What other plays has he or she written and where does this play fit in with his/her body of work?
- Is this a new play, a “world premiere” or an “area premiere” of the play? Or is it an oft-performed work?
- Who is the director? Who are the actors? Who designed the set, lighting, costumes, sound and props?
- Who are the main characters of the play and what motivates them? What are the circumstances the characters find themselves in?
- Where is the play set?
- When do the events of the play take place? What is the historical time period? Also, what is the span of events within the play; i.e., does it cover two days in the characters’ lives or ten years?
- What is the genre of the play? Is it a comedy, tragedy, drama, melodrama, satire, historical play or some combination of genres?
- What is the style of the play? Is it realism, fantasy, absurdism? Is it interactive? Is it a memory play? Is it a play-within-a-play? Is it reader’s theater? Note here if the style is something that seems to be established in the script, or is the style something brought to the play by the design and performance elements that would be determined by the director, designers and actors. For example, the playwright may have written an historical melodrama like Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, but the director may have decided to give the play an absurdist twist with the design elements and the staging.



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THEATER & DANCE

Voices raised ebulliently, passengers of ‘Titanic’ head for the deep

BY PETER MARKS
Theater Critic

• Originally Published December 20, 2016

The scale of *Titanic*, the historical event, is one of those concepts that, once absorbed, is hard to get out of your head. And so it is with the score of “*Titanic*,” the musical.

Songwriter Maury Yeston, of “*Nine*” fame, created a majestic composition filled with the type of heart-pounding choral numbers that reinforce a central idea of this 1997 Tony winner — that the fates of the more than 2,200 passengers on the doomed ocean liner were linked, tragically and unalterably. From the stokers in the boiler rooms to the Strauses in first class, every life bore significance — just as, on a stage, every voice in the variegated cast is essential to completing Yeston’s euphonious tapestry.

The glories of Yeston’s craftsmanship are honored fully on Signature Theatre’s stage, in director Eric Schaeffer’s splendidly sung — and steered — revival in the company’s Max theater. Configuring the seating on all four sides of Paul Tate dePoo III’s innovative set, a design dominated by a network of nautical gangplanks and bridges splicing the air, Schaeffer places the audience

within virtual arm’s length of the action. This proves to be a huge help with a work that, aside from its robust, music-driven emotionality, lacks a thoroughly engaging theatrical rationale.

Despite its best-musical Tony, “*Titanic*,” with a book by the late Peter Stone (“*1776*”), is not a favorite on the musical-revival circuit, because, one suspects, the sprawling piece demands a huge, vocally adept cast and, more to the point, the story has nowhere to go but down. “How could such a terrible thing happen to such a marvelous ship?” someone asks, and well, that pretty much sums the musical up. It’s essentially a pageant of man-made calamity, the

mingled one-note tales of rich and poor voyagers headed to America with storied pasts or grand hopes. The lives of most of them dissolve in the hubris of an overreaching steamship company that, among other examples of shortsightedness, didn’t sufficiently armor the infrastructure or provide the requisite number of lifeboats.

Like the ship itself — “the largest moving object in the world,” the cast sings in the breathtaking opening sequence — “*Titanic*” has to carry a tremendous amount of weight. And though it no longer has to emerge from the shadow of the Oscar-winning blockbuster movie of the same title that came out the same



COLIN HOVDE
Stephen Gregory Smith and Katie McManus with other members of the ensemble of “*Titanic*” at Signature Theatre.

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year, the musical can't conjure with particular substance the gallery of personalities it scatters across the ship's decks. James Cameron's lavish disaster flick is more successful in part because it reduces unfathomable horror to a single love story.

Nevertheless, the tension and pathos of "Titanic" the musical resound more potently in the intimate environment Schaeffer masterminds than perhaps ever before. This is one of the most sophisticatedly conceived and shepherded productions of this director's career, and just the sort of boldly outsize project that this company should be undertaking. For it turns out that your heart is in your throat far more of the time than during the comparatively lumbering Broadway original. No small amount of responsibility for this arises out of the decision to engage conductor James Moore and upgrade this version's orchestrations for a complement of 17 musicians, ensconced in the balcony. (Down below, Frank Labovitz's costumes, especially for the first-class ladies, and Matthew Gardiner's crisp dances supply additional rewarding accents.)

What lovely harmonies this all makes for. Ryan Hickey's excellent sound design plays a significant role here, too, but the cast, made up largely of Signature regulars and semi-regulars, has never sounded better. Among the 20 singer-actors, many come across as plugged in to special high-voltage batteries for the occasion, and that goes doubly for Tracy Lynn Olivera as celebrity-obsessed second-class passenger Alice Beane; Sam Ludwig as stoker



CHRISTOPHER MUELLER

From left, Christopher Bloch, Nick Lehan, Lawrence Redmond and Bobby Smith in "Titanic."

Frederick Barrett; Bobby Smith as ship designer Thomas Andrews; Nick Lehan, playing radio operator Harold Bride; Iyona Blake as Caroline Neville, a sort-of incognito eloping swell; and Kevin McAllister as the ship's first officer, William Murdoch.

They all get their moments to wrap their supple voices around Yeston's songs, whose period influences range from rag to Gilbert and Sullivan. The solo high points include Ludwig's rendition of "Barrett's Song," a lament by a lowly stoker that highlights the musical's critique of the rigid early-20th-century class system that's replicated on the ship. Lehan, in a duet with Ludwig, contributes a stirring "The Night Was Alive." In Act 2, which is consumed with the aftermath of the ship's collision with the iceberg, Smith joins the beleaguered captain, E.J. Smith (Christopher Bloch), and the bullying steamship line chairman, J. Bruce Ismay (Lawrence Redmond), for "The Blame," a well-staged round robin of melodic finger-pointing.

Sometimes-undersung heroes of other Signature shows are here accorded some nice moments, too: Russell Sunday, as a tolerant husband; John Leslie Wolfe, playing

magnate Isidor Straus; and Stephen Gregory Smith, as a deckhand applying plaintive force to the song "No Moon" that prefigures the ship's fatal wound.

Yeston's score, though, reveals that in giving strength to the "Titanic" numbers, there is strength in numbers. Nothing on this evening surpasses the wonderful extended opening sequence when an exhilarating chorus of the damned assembles on the stage and sings so poignantly of what lies ahead. You almost believe they have an inkling that they are soon to be a heavenly choir.

Titanic, music and lyrics by Maury Yeston, book by Peter Stone. Directed by Eric Schaeffer. Choreography, Matthew Gardiner; music direction, James Moore; orchestrations, Josh Clayton; set, Paul Tate Depoo III, costumes, Frank Labovitz; lighting, Amanda Zieve; sound, Ryan Hickey; wigs, Anne Nesmith; casting, Walter Ware; production stage manager, Kerry Epstein. With Christopher Mueller, Matt Conner, Sean Burns, Hasani Allen, Florence Lacey, Jamie Eacker, Erin Driscoll, Katie Mcmanus, Chris Sizemore. About 2 hours 25 minutes. Tickets, \$49-\$119. Through Jan. 29 At Signature Theatre, 4200 Campbell Ave., Arlington. Visit Sigtheatre.org or call 703-820-9771.

Peter Marks joined the Washington Post as its chief theater critic in 2002. Prior to that he worked for nine years at the New York Times, on the culture, metropolitan and national desks, and spent about four years as its off-Broadway drama critic. Follow @petermarksdrama

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Who Should Hold This Office?

All the world has been his stage. When John Kerry was asked by the British Council to write an essay for their “Living Shakespeare Essay Collection,” he chose Rosalind, the heroine from *As You Like It*, as his choice for his job. He also stated that “William Shakespeare has to be the UK’s most enduring ambassador.”

Kerry, the 68th Secretary of State from February 1, 2013, to January 20, 2017, according to the Department of State website, visited 91 countries and travelled 1,395,606 miles in his official capacity. In his essay he draws on his experience, lines from the comedy, and Rosalind’s actions to support his choice.

“Rosalind, who ‘promised to make all this matter even,’ stands out as perhaps the greatest diplomat in all literature,” Kerry wrote. “She navigates her own personal traumas of exile, banishment and disguise with tenacity, patience and good humour.”

Other points he makes include:

- Edward R. Murrow, the great American journalist, summed it up by noting the real crucial link in the international exchange is the last three feet, which is bridged by personal contact, one person talking to another.
- Another facet of the drama that applies directly to the work of a negotiator is the theme of time.
- There may be a jaundiced view of politics in the play — a sense that the court is prone to corruption and intrigue. “There’s no news at the court, sir, but the old new.” Yet, there is also an examination of how to fix it.
- It deals with questions of social diversity in its treatment of the distinction between the rural, urban, and courtly folk. It celebrates the powerful role of women and subverts restricted views of gender.

Now Your Turn

1. Select a Cabinet department or agency position that requires presidential appointment and the advice and consent of Congress.
2. Consider the characters you have met in literature — fiction and drama.
3. Decide which of these characters you would nominate for the job.
4. Write an essay in which you introduce the character and state the position. Provide support for your nominee. Demonstrate an understanding of the job’s requirements as well as actions and words of the character and what others have to say about him or her.

NOTE: Take time to read John Kerry’s essay to learn how he builds his case using Shakespeare’s words and actions of the chosen work’s character as well as his own experience as a diplomat. The essay is found on the British Council website: <http://www.shakespearelives.org/explore/literature/living-shakespeare/john-kerry>

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It is pretty clear that the student-artist's work was sacrificed to political pressure and vigilante censorship — in the U.S. Capitol of all places. That should alarm anyone who thinks the First Amendment, unlike art, is not a matter of personal taste and choice.

At issue is “Untitled #1,” a painting by Missouri student David Pulphus that depicts racial confrontation with police. It won unanimous approval in the Congressional Art Competition in Missouri's 1st Congressional District last May and, like the more than 400 other entries accepted and approved, was displayed in the U.S. Capitol. For more than six months, the painting hung in the underground tunnel between the Capitol and the Cannon House Office Building and was viewed by thousands of visitors without incident.

That changed when an alt-right blog and other conservative commentators started a campaign against it, objecting to its imaging of police as animals. Congressional Republicans got in the act, taking it upon themselves to remove it from the wall and give it to Rep. William Lacy Clay (D-Mo.), who, in turn, joined with other members of the Congressional Black Caucus to have it rehung. Architect of the Capitol Stephen T. Ayers ordered the artwork removed on Tuesday, saying it violates House rules that include a prohibition on subjects of contemporary political controversy. If that determination had been made when the painting was first reviewed (and approved), it might have carried some credibility. But other paintings can be seen as dealing with political themes, and the architect's revelation came only after a mean-spirited political campaign, and after House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) weighed in with his own review (“Disgusting”). That sequence of events sets a sad precedent.

The painting was returned to Mr. Clay, who said he will display it in his office. Young Mr. Pulphus, for his part, has acted with restraint and dignity. His only comment: “The art speaks for itself.” So does the unseemly stampede in Mr. Ryan's House.