Beautiful Star: An Appalachian Nativity

Teacher Resource Guide

Triad Stage

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the educator resource guide for Triad Stage’s production of BEAUTIFUL STAR: AN APPLACHIAN NATIVITY. We are excited to share this play and its music, originally created by Triad Stage Founding Artistic Director Preston Lane and local musician Laurelyn Dossett, for the holiday season.

Our goals for this guide include:

- Noting historical and artistic context about the show that you can share with your students.
- Providing practical instructional activities that you can use in your classroom that make connections between the production and curricular standards in areas including English/Language Arts, Social Studies, and Drama/Theatre.
- Offering opportunities for students to make personal connections between the production and their own experiences, as well as sparking dialogue about the play’s central themes and big ideas.

In the guide, you will find dramaturgical information about the show and Triad Stage’s production of the play, as well as a number of links to additional resources and information. There is also a section of classroom activities that are aligned with secondary English/Language Arts and Social Studies standards, are designed to meet curricular goals, and seek to support students’ exploration of the play’s themes.

If you have any questions about the guide or how to use it, please don’t hesitate to reach out to Learning Director Lauren Smith at lauren@triadstage.org.

KEY

Questions for Dialogue

Interesting Facts

Classroom Activity
ABOUT THE STORY

BEAUTIFUL STAR tells two stories: the story of the nativity, and the story of an Appalachian church who produces an annual performance of the nativity story. It is, in many ways, an adaptation of the story of Jesus’s birth through the eyes of parishioners whose beliefs surround this story itself.

The play was written by Triad Stage Artistic Director Preston Lane and the music was written by local musician Laurelyn Dossett. It premiered in 2006, and this year’s production will mark the 6th production since the premiere. The piece was written, designed, and produced right here in Greensboro, and was created specifically for this region’s residents. While six productions have taken place, the performances are unique each year, as new actors and creative teams re-imagine how to make the story come to life.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT AND DIRECTOR

Preston Lane (Playwright, Director & Triad Stage Founding Artistic Director) grew up in the Blue Ridge mountains of North Carolina with Appalachian ancestry stretching all the way back to Tidence Lane, the first Baptist preacher in what would become Tennessee. His childhood dream was to live in a NC Piedmont city where he could hear trains and interact daily with such big city trappings as revolving doors and escalators. He frequently checked out recorded plays on albums from the old Watauga County Public Library and spent many afternoons listening to Marat/Sade, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf, and A Streetcar Named Desire. His central conflict as a child was that on Saturday evenings his parents wanted to watch The Lawrence Welk Show and he wanted to watch Hee Haw. This conflict still dominates much of his work. Besides a brief fascination with being a dump truck driver, Preston never considered any other career than as a theater maker. He became aware of himself as an artist at UNCSA, developed a passion for visual storytelling at Yale School of Drama, and is deeply indebted to a long line of collaborative partners. He is also thankful for amazing teachers from Miriam Darnell, Sandra Daye, John Foster West, Yury Belov, Earle Gister, Barney Hammond, Lesley Hunt, Ming Cho Lee, Nick Martin and many many others. Preston is honored to pass on the tradition they entrusted to him to the next generation. Gerald Freedman took him under his wing and Richard Hamburger gave him his first real job and mentored him. He founded Triad Stage with Rich Whittington to explore how theater can engage with a community. He’s directed nearly 100 shows, written almost a dozen, and is an honorary citizen of Hawboro, NC. He believes that theater can make our community stronger by exploring stories that unite and challenge us. Preston is grateful to be a theater maker in North Carolina.

ABOUT THE COMPOSER

Laurelyn Dossett (Musician/Composer/Music Director) has partnered with Preston Lane on six plays featuring regional folklore and original music: Brother Wolf, Beautiful Star: An Appalachian Nativity, Bloody Blackbeard, Providence Gap, Snow Queen and Radiunt Abundunt. Commissioned by the NC Symphony, she composed and performed “The Gathering: A Winter’s Tale in Six Songs” in 2011. A song from Brother Wolf, “Anna Lee,” was featured on Levon Helm’s Grammy-winning record Dirt Farmer; her song “Leaving Eden” is the title track of the Grammy-nominated recording by the Carolina Chocolate Drops. She is currently writing the songs for a new play called Leaving Eden with playwright Mike Wiley, which will premiere at Playmakers Rep in April 2018. She has received the Betty Cone Medal of Arts and the NC Arts Council Fellowship for songwriting. She lives in Greensboro, NC.
In Medieval time the Roman Catholic Church was an organization of extreme power in the lives of the people of Europe. Centering their lives around church-going and the religious rule of law, even entertainment became sponsored through the Church. Short, religious dramas, performed in Latin, were presented to churchgoers.

During the thirteenth century, however, the community decided as a way to celebrate the festival of Corpus Christi, they would take back liturgical drama from the Church. They translated the plays from Latin to the way common people spoke, and added secular, short, comedic dramas in between the traditional religious ones. They also updated the plays from Biblical times to modern times—converting the characters to recognizable and relatable figures; for example the Biblical story of Cain and Abel was rewritten to make the characters Yorkshire farmers.

These community celebrations were organized by separate craft guilds who were responsible for producing one of the plays presented. Each guild would present a play which might be closely related to their trade. For example, the Shipwrights Guild would present the Building of Noah’s Ark while Bakers presented The Last Supper. Several guilds still remain in the city of York, England. Each guild would not only be responsible for the play but also building the pageant wagon on which the play would be performed.

With large versions being akin to floats in a Mardi Gras parade, pageant wagons were structures and vehicles created by guild members to present their Mystery Cycle plays. Little is known about the construction of these structures, but accounts written after the era, which may just be interpretations suggest that large wagons were mounted on six wheels, with an upper deck on which a scene would be presented and a lower deck in which actors changed and waited to perform. Other, smaller, wagons were just four wheeled structures with a platform on which to perform.
ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS AS WE KNOW IT TODAY

Before Christianity began to spread across the European continent, there were several mid-winter celebrations in existence. These pagan—and in this case Pre-Christian—festivals were vaguely similar across several cultures. The Romans celebrated Saturnalia, a festival characterized by drinking ale, gambling and games, the eternal burning of candles and fires, a large feast and the temporary dissolution of the class structure—during Saturnalia there was no slave nor master, no rich, no poor and all people came together to celebrate as equals. Northern Europeans (who would now be Scandinavian, German, etc.) celebrated Jul or Yule. This festival very closely resembled Saturnalia where participants feasted on meats, drank wines and ales, burned fires and candles, and made ritual sacrifice of animals to their ancestors.

As Christianity spread, Christmas was adopted to encourage conversion—those people who were used to participating in these pagan holidays, could continue most of the practices but now in the name of the Christian God. Some of these practices survive—very often Christmas is celebrated with a large family dinner, the lighting of fires and candles (or at least some festival of lights) and a feeling of community and togetherness regardless of social/economic status. Though Christmas, religiously, celebrates the birth of Christ, the date of Christ’s birth and Christmas most likely do not coincide. The mid-winter celebration of Christmas comes as a direct result of the co-opting and erasure of pagan practices.

Knowing its roots in paganism, Puritans during the 17th century waged a war against Christmas and when they gained power during the English Revolution they outlawed the holiday celebrations. Puritans who came to the Americas also held these views and observing Christmas carried a fine of five shillings. Larger English society adapted to a Christmas-less calendar year and historians document that nearly an entire generation of children grew up without even an idea of what Christmas could be. Christmas was still celebrated, quietly, by some English people and it never truly died out in other parts of the world, like—most importantly for us—Germany.

In 1843, Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol was published, and while it may seem to modern readers that this novella was a picture of a Victorian Christmas, it was not very representative of what Dickens experienced during Christmas at all. Instead, it represented what Christmas could be. As audiences delighted in his ghost tale, they also became enchanted with this idea of a Christmas that focused on family, charity, celebration and goodwill towards men. Dickens never mentioned Christ in his account of Christmas, only tangentially mentions that the reformed Scrooge “also went to church”. But it is from this novella that we get such phrases as “Merry Christmas”, and “Bah! Humbug”, and that miser and Scrooge have become synonymous. It is also from Dickens that the idea of not working on Christmas comes, as well the extolling of the “Spirit of Christmas”.

It may be mere coincidence that the same year, at the same Christmas, the first Christmas card was created and sent. Once Queen Victoria had received one, she became infatuated with the idea and spent many following Christmases creating them with her children. The young queen was married to the German-born Prince Albert. In his native country, there had been no Puritan suppression of Christmas and he was used to not only celebrating Christmas but also having a Christmas tree. He brought this tradition with him to England, and, as Dickens new romanticized Christmas took hold of Englishmen, so did this symbol of the holiday—especially when in 1848, two days before Christmas, the royal family appeared posed next to their Christmas tree in the Illustrated London News.

- What Christmas traditions are familiar with? What are your favorites?
- What is a Christmas or holiday tradition that you would like to start?
- Have you ever had to break a holiday tradition? How did you feel about that when it happened?
DEFINING “APPALACHIAN”

BEAUTIFUL STAR: AN APPLACHIAN NATIVITY was inspired by the culture of a specific region of North Carolina and beyond called Appalachia.

Appalachia is a large expanse of North America stretching 205,000 square miles from southern New York to northern Mississippi and touching parts of 13 states. The region is home to approximately 25 million people in 420 counties. The Appalachian Mountain range began forming nearly 480 million years ago and its highest group is Mount Mitchell in North Carolina at 6,684 feet (2,037 m), which is the highest point in the United States east of the Mississippi River. While the geographic borders of Appalachia are rather far reaching, what one would consider the Appalachian cultural region is a much more specific area. The southern faction of geographic Appalachia is the birthplace and center of the region’s cultural capital. This expanse going, arguably, as far north as Kentucky and as far south as Georgia and Mississippi, has shaped what people view as Appalachian culture—the ever shifting culture of Mountain Folk which is birthed from a number of historical and cultural combinations with influences from Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and Scotch-Irish and German colonists and immigrants.

The Appalachian people are most often marketed as poverty-stricken, poorly educated, country White folk with little resources and sad existences. What is more true of mountain people is that they are part of a rich and growing history and culture which has remained despite major shifts in the larger cultural and economic shifts in the country. Appalachian people are much more ethnically and socially diverse than lots of people give them credit for and, while there are big problems with regards to resources, and access to monetary wealth—the region is not characterized by the dismal view that those outside Appalachia often readily assign it. For more information about diverse cultures in Appalachia, click here.

Where Appalachian people could be considered “money poor,” the wealth of the region is its land and natural resources. One of the most biologically diverse areas of the North American continent, home to hundreds of native and unique plant and animal species, Appalachia is home to a large tourism economy which includes folks from all over hiking and camping in the region. The Great Appalachian Valley, just southwest of the Hudson River, is considered some of the most fertile soil in the United States. In the Industrial Revolution and on into the early 1900s, as the need for coal grew, the region experienced exponential population growth as people rushed to the hills and valleys in search of mining jobs. Since the shift in coal usage, the depletion of some of these resources, and the mechanization of mining changed the economic boom of the area—communities have had to find new, and sometimes traditional, ways of living.

Appalachia is also rich with arts and culture which include Old Time and Bluegrass music, cuisine that combines foods from Native and colonial cultures, quilting, weaving and pottery that is unique to the region.
This performance and the nature of it as an adaptation lend well to students’ writing their own adaptations and variations on the production’s themes.

**Content Area:** English/Language Arts  
**Approximate Time:** Varies; could be a short writing exercise or a more extended revision and re-writing process over the course of several weeks.

Writing Prompt Suggestions:
- Ask students to write about a time that they included someone in an activity or group when they didn’t have a place to be. They could also write a fictional story, poem, or script about inclusion or belonging.
- Ask students to write about a time they needed to ask for help with a problem, or a time they helped someone else who was having a problem.
- Ask students to write an essay or story about their experience of growing up in North Carolina (i.e. foods, recreational activities, traditions, etc.), experiences that are specific to this location.

**Standards**  
**Writing Standard 3:**  
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

**Writing Standard 5:**  
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
Content Area: English/Language Arts & Social Studies
Approximate Time: 20-30 minutes

Directions:
Clear a space in the room where students can move around safely. Ask students to close their eyes or look down toward the floor and think about a place in their community that’s important to them. Ask them to think about that place and really put themselves there in their mind: what does it look like? Feel like? Sound like? Smell like?

Next, with a co-teacher or a student as a partner, demonstrate the task: describe the place you’ve chosen in detail as though you are there. Really walk through the space, pretending to step over cracks in sidewalks, push doors open, etc. Include a number of details from multiple senses (i.e. my friend’s kitchen smells like freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies) and mention activities or events that often happen in that space.

Explain to students that they are going to describe their own place to a partner. Have them find a partner, find a space in the room, and choose who will describe first and who will listen first. Encourage listeners to listen attentively and to ask clarifying questions if they would like to, but not to make any comments or judgments about the place.

Give the first group about 5 minutes to describe their place, encouraging them to add more descriptive details if they are “done” before the time. Switch groups.

Once students have finished, reflect as a group.

Reflection Questions:
- What was it like to share your place with someone else?
- What was it like to listen to someone else describe a place that has meaning for them? What did you notice about the kinds of details they shared?
- What kinds of places are important to us as a group? Why do you think that is?

When should I use this activity? This activity could be used before or after viewing the show.

If you use this activity after viewing the show, you might ask students to think about what it would be like to leave the place they described, and make connections between their experience and that of the characters as they search for shelter at the inn and elsewhere; what would it be like for them to leave a familiar place?

Standards
Writing Standard 3:
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Speaking and Listening Standard 1:
- Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
**CLASSROOM ACTIVITY | RESEARCHING A CHRISTMAS SONG**

**Grade Level:** 5th and up (can be adjusted depending on students’ prior experience with research)

**Content Area:** English, Social Studies, Music

**Approximate Time:** 1 hour in-class work time, homework time, 5 minutes/student to present

**Directions:**
Assign or have students choose a traditional or holiday song. Ask them to research that song, including:

- Its country or region of origin;
- Its history (when was it written? First performed?)
- Artists who have performed or recorded the song and their interpretations
- Text analysis of the song; what is it actually talking about (especially if it uses language that we wouldn't use anymore today)
- Any other interesting facts

Ask students to choose a favorite recording to play as part of their presentation.

Some song options (or have students choose their own):

- *O Come, All Ye Faithful*
- *Silent Night*
- *O Christmas Tree*
- *Jingle Bells*
- *O Holy Night*
- *Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas*

**When should I use this activity?** This activity could be used either before or after the performance.

**Standards:**

**Writing Standard 7**
- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

**Writing Standard 8**
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

**Speaking and Listening Standard 4**
- Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITY | HOLIDAY TRADITION TABLEAUX

Content Area: Social Studies/Language Arts
Grade Level: 4th grade and up
Approximate Time: 30-60 minutes

Have students brainstorm a list of their favorite annual or holiday traditions. These might be activities that they like to do with their families, friends, or on their own. Once they’ve brainstormed a list, have them pick one that is their favorite (or that they would like to work with for the activity that follows).

Option 1: You might choose to have students form groups based on their preferred activities. If you would like to do this, have students circulate around the room and state their activity (in a few words), then form groups based on people who have similar traditions.

Option 2: You might choose to have students choose their own groups or put them into groups.

Once students are in groups, have them share their favorite traditions and a short description of that activity and why they value it. Then, ask them to generate a “tableau,” or “frozen picture” using the group members as actors. This frozen picture should include postures that students can hold for a few minutes, and should convey the activity. It can be concrete or abstract, and should (if possible) include all members of the group. You might ask students to include a title.

If students are working in groups formed based on their activities, they might only make one picture that encapsulates all of their activities. If students are working in groups formed in another way, you might have them create a sequence of frozen images, one for each tradition or activity. While students are working, circulate and ask them to make their images as specific as possible. You might also offer pointers about elements such as stage picture (ie we want to be able to see each person's face).

When students have completed their images, ask them to share them for the class one by one. Ask the audience the following questions after each image or sequence:

- How would you describe this image?
- What feelings or emotions does this image make you think of?
- What kind of holiday traditions might be part of this image?

After all groups have had a chance to share, ask students to reflect as a group:

- What did you notice that our images had in common? Why do you think these traditions showed up in our images?
- (if doing this activity after seeing the show) What do these activities have in common with the yearly performance the members of the church in Beautiful Star put on? How are they different?

When should I use this activity? This activity could be used before or after seeing the show.

Standards
Social Studies Essential Standard
- C.1 Explain how the behaviors and practices of individuals and groups influenced societies, civilizations and regions.
  - C.1.1 Analyze how cultural expressions reflected the values of civilizations, societies and regions (e.g., oral traditions, art, dance, music, literature, and architecture).
REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Drama-Based Instruction Network.
http://dbp.theatredance.utexas.edu/.

The Appalachian Resource Center.
https://www.arc.gov/appalachian_region/MapofAppalachia.asp.

Contemporary Music Center.
http://www.contemporarymusiccenter.com/event/bluegrass-jam-nov-16-7pm/

National Public Radio Code Switch.

For more information about Triad Stage's production of BEAUTIFUL STAR, please visit our Dramaturgical Website.

For more information about bluegrass music in North Carolina, visit http://www.blueridgemusicnc.com/about/appalachian-music.

For more information about Appalachian food culture, visit http://visitappalachia.com/bonappetitappalachia/.

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Guide design by Stacy Calfo.

TRIAD STAGE STAFF

Artistic
Preston Lane, Founding Artistic Director
Sarah Hankins, Associate Artistic Director
Lauren Smith, Learning Director
Kamilah Bush, Artistic Apprentice

Administration
Richard Whittington, Founding Managing Director
Jason Bogden, General Manager
Ramon Perez, Company Manager
Bobby Pittman, Facilities/Rentals Coordinator
Justin Nichols, Development Manager
Tiffany Albright, Marketing Manager
Stacy Calfo, Graphic Designer
Kathryn Knoerl, Administrative Apprentice

Audience Services
Sherry Barr, Director of Audience Services
Olivia Langford, Box Office Manager
Martha Latta, Mary Reading, Box Office Managers on Duty
Josh Kellum, Box Office & Lobby Bar Associate
Hailee Mason, Box Office Associate

Production
Lara Maerz, Production Manager
Tannis Boyajian, Technical Director
Donald Quilinquin, Master Carpenter
Eric Hart, Props Master
Jennifer Speciale Stanley, Costume Shop Manager
Erin Barnett, Assistant Costume Shop Manager
Troy Morelli, Master Electrician
Derek Graham, Sound Supervisor
Jessica Holcombe, Scenic Charge
Hannah Mans, Production Management Apprentice
Alex Boyt, Stage Management Apprentice
Eva Trunzo, Carpentry Apprentice
Shay Hopkins-Paine, Props Apprentice
Sara Beth Watkins, Costume Apprentice/Wardrobe Supervisor
Megan Banfield, Sound Apprentice