

# AMERICAN SONG

March 15-April 10, 2016  
The Quadracci Powerhouse

By Joanna Murray-Smith  
Directed by Mark Clements

## TEACHER'S GUIDE

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

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### SUGGESTED TEACHING AND LEARNING TOPICS

- Youth Identity in Modern Society
- Parenting in the 21st Century
- Mass Shootings & Coping with Tragedy

This Teacher Guide is designed to be used in the classroom along with Milwaukee Rep's Play Guide for *American Song*. These are some suggested activities for your classroom. The Play Guide is available online at <http://www.milwaukeeep.com/On-Stage/2015-16-Season/American-Song-PlayGuide/>

## YOUTH IDENTITY IN MODERN SOCIETY

### DISCUSS: Pre-Show Questions

- *American Song* follows one man's look at what it means to be a father in today's society. Access to technology and the increasing use of social media at a young age has a dramatic impact on the youth of this generation, and parents face new challenges in raising their children. How does social media and privacy impact your identity? How do you think society affects your identity as a youth, son/daughter, friend, or student?
- TV shows, movies, video games, celebrities, and magazines arguably portray children and teens in more mature situations than in decades past. Do you feel that what you see on TV or in the movies affects your own identity? Does it affect your relationship with your parents? How? Do you think it has a positive or negative impact on your identity?

### DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- Unfortunately, the issue of youth violence is increasingly present in modern society. Andy often related each action we take as humans to one "stone" in the wall. Do you think it is possible to go back through each individual action and determine the one "stone" that caused such a tragedy? Why or why not?
- In many cases of violence, the family is unaware that the shooter is having violent thoughts. If it is difficult to determine specific causes, how do you think we can prevent similar events from happening in the future? If you could create a plan as a class to combat youth violence, what steps would you include?

### COLLAGE IT OUT: Collage Art Responses

A few days before you would like to complete this activity in class, encourage students to bring in newspapers, magazines, or any other text/images they can cut up to create a collage. Inspired by the discussion of youth identity in the media and in reality, guide students through creating collage art pieces. While students are sorting through resources, guide students' choices by encouraging them to include at least one image of a person/body part, a texture, a food, an object, and at least one word/phrase. As students begin to complete their work, guide them in naming their pieces. If possible, students may present their pieces to the class; discussing their inspiration, why they chose those images, and what it means to them.

*Debrief:* Ask students what challenges they faced when searching for images. How did the play inspire the images they chose? How can we use visual art to communicate feelings and stories? without words? How can a poster impact who sees a show?

## PARENTING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

### DISCUSS: Pre-Show Questions

- Begin by asking students for some adjectives to describe their personal view of a "good parent". How might these differ from a parent in decades past? What expectations are there for parents today? Are these expectations realistic? Should there be higher expectations?
- What challenges do you think parents face regarding their child's use of the internet and social media? What freedoms and privacy do you want from your parents or guardians? How do your needs for privacy and your parents' needs to protect you clash?

### DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- At one point during the show Andy says, "You can do everything right and still. . ." Discuss this point with students. Do you think Andy is at fault in any way? At what point do you believe the responsibility switches from the parents to the child? Can parents prevent their children from committing acts of violence? Why or why not?
- How did this show impact your opinion on parenting in the 21st century? If you could talk with Andy, what would you say to him? What would you ask him?

### WRITE IT OUT:

#### Found poem/Walt Whitman poem

In *American Song* Andy references Walt Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing", "They come together, these diverse songs – and out of joining together something greater is made than each of us alone. That's my America." Andy believes modern America is fractured, no longer singing a unified song.

Read through Walt Whitman's poem (found in the Play Guide on page 7). What emotions does this poem evoke? Do you agree with Andy that Whitman's view of America is no longer true today? Is America "fractured"? Instruct students to discuss these issues with partners and then respond in the form of a Found Poem.

Found poetry is a type of poetry created by taking words, phrases, and sometimes whole passages from other sources and reframing them (a literary equivalent of a collage) by making changes in spacing and lines, or by adding or deleting text, thus imparting new meaning.

Guide students to take words and phrases from "I Hear America Singing" to inspire a new poem that reflects their thoughts on "fractured America", parenting in the 21st century, or other reactions to *American Song*. Remind students that visual organization of the words may be used to help communicate a message in poetry (i.e. large spaces between words).

*Debrief:* What imagery and symbolism stood out to you in Walt Whitman's poem? Why did you choose specific words and phrases? How can you incorporate visual art into poetry?

# MASS SHOOTINGS & COPING WITH TRAGEDY

## DISCUSS: Pre-Show Questions

- Today's society is fraught with violence: on the streets, on television screens, on phone screens, on the front page of newspapers. Do you think our society appropriately portrays and discusses the issue of violence? Why is it difficult for people to talk about these issues?
- The reality of mental illness, as well as the emotional steps necessary to cope with tragedy, is beginning to take more of a front seat in modern society. Why do you think it has taken so long for people to begin talking about these issues openly? How can society work to increase awareness of the reality of mental illness and erase the stigma attached to it?

## DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- *American Song* covers several controversial topics through the lens of a father. When walking out of the theater, which of these topics stuck with you the most? Why? How can you utilize your reactions to empower yourself to take positive action?
- How can we as the community of Milwaukee continue to employ theater to encourage dialogue? How can dialogue turn into positive change in a community? What steps come next?

## FREEZE IT OUT: Conflict Resolution Freeze

In order to spark different conversations on controversial issues, introduce the game of Freeze/Justify. Students will need to brainstorm different ideas about how to solve a problem.

1. Introduce one of the topics below to start a scene between two actors (student volunteers). Encourage students to make strong choices as they embody the characters in the scene. This may include: big, intentional motions, strong word choices to distinguish characters, clear facial expressions. (If necessary, create a starting line to jumpstart the improvised scene.)
2. An audience member may at any point call out FREEZE and tap out one person in the scene. The audience member who called FREEZE will now take the place of the person they tapped out. They must resume the position and stance of the person exactly, and begin trying to resolve the scene differently.

### Some topics you may explore:

A friend brings a knife to school just to "show it off"

A friend tries to convince you to skip out on an after school commitment to go to a movie

A bully confronts you about your clothes

A classmate tries to either distract you from an assignment or blow off a class

A friend opens up about a home life that worries you about their safety or well-being

*Debrief:* What did you learn from watching people resolve these issues in different ways? What challenges did you face when stepping in front of the class? What can we gain from listening to and considering a different point of view?

## STANDARDS

### Common Core State Standards:

#### English Language Arts

**RL.6-10.1** LITERACY  
COMPREHENSION

**RL.6-12.3** ANALYZE DIALOGUE

**SL.8-12.1** COLLABORATIVE  
DISCUSSIONS

**SL.6-12.4** PRESENTATION OF  
KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS



James DeVita in the Milwaukee Repertory Theater world-premiere production of *American Song* by Joanna Murray-Smith. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

## MILWAUKEE REP EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

The Education Department offers backstage tours, pre- and post-show workshops and classroom residencies.

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