

## **Performing Memoirs: Exploring narrative style through theatrical adaptations**

**By Christina Pitcher-Cozzone, Great Valley High School, PA**

### **Lesson Overview:**

This lesson will require at 4, 45-minute long class periods. Day 1 will review the techniques of creating a script and perform the teacher-created model from “Salvation”. Day 2 the students will focus on the language of the memoir they intend to adapt. Day 3 students will craft the script and rehearse. Day 4 students will present.

### **Goals:**

- to emphasize the lessons of show don't tell and the narrative form through performance of short pieces
- to make connections between the play structure and the narrative structure
- to increase empathy by examining and speaking the voices of diverse narrators

### **Common Core Standards:**

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3: Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama .
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.b: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

### **PA Core Standards:**

- CC.1.3.11-12.C Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama.
- CC.1.3.11-12.D Evaluate how an author's point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text
- CC.1.4.11-12.O Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, description, reflection, multiple plotlines, and pacing to develop experiences, events, and/or characters; use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, settings, and/or characters

### **Procedures:**

- 1: Have students read “Salvation” aloud as a class.
- 2: Have the students gather in groups and return to the text and label at least 10 lines as either “child's voice” or “adult reflection” (abbreviating may be wise here).
  - Examples to use: “My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside!” (Young Langston- here he is in the moment and the voice sounds like a child- it is less articulate, more excited, and reflects a direct response to his aunt.)
  - “That night, for the last time in my life but on –for I was a big boy twelve years old—I cried. I cried, in bed alone, and couldn't stop.” (Adult Langston- here he is looking back on the time period, he offers insight that he can only know with years of experience after this moment.)
- 3: Return to the text as a class and discuss the markers of the child's voice and the adult reflection.
- 4: Share sample script adaptation with class; ask for 5 volunteers to read it aloud.
- 5: Give students the assignment “Performing Memoirs” and “Adaptation Strategies for Using Live Performance to Explore Narrative Fiction”.
- 6: Allow students to form their groups for their own memoir adaptation.

**Materials:**

- Langston Hughes' "Salvation" (original text)
- Selected memoirs from diverse groups (male, female, cisgender, homosexual, and immigrant-Americans)

Adaptation Strategies for Using Live Performance to Explore Narrative Fiction, Developed by Matthew Spangler, San Jose State University

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**"Salvation" by Langston Hughes**  
Script for performance crafted by Miss P-C

**Performance notes:**

- 5 performers are ideal for this scene
- Props can include a bench or row of desks (or a few blocks/ottoman cubes to sit on)

**Adult Langston:** (standing downstage, facing audience) I was saved from sin when I was going on thirteen.

**Young Langston:** (sitting on a bench with his head down, he looks up before delivering his lines) But not really saved. It happened like this.

**Voice 1:** (coming from behind YL) There was a big revival at Auntie Reed's church.

**Voice 2:** (walking closer to YL) Every night for weeks there had been much preaching, singing, praying, and shouting, and some very hardened sinners had been brought to Christ, and the membership of the church had grown by leaps and bounds.

**Older Langston:** (still upstage) Then just before the revival ended, they held a special meeting for children, V1, V2, V2, AL "to bring the young lambs to the fold."

**Older Langston:** My aunt spoke of it for days ahead.

**Young Langston:** That night I was escorted to the front row... (voice 1 brings YL to the front row, voice 2 joins on bench)

**Voice 1:** ...with all the other young sinners, who had not yet been brought to Jesus. (voice 1 now sits on the bench, too)

**Young Langston:** (standing up with energy) My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! (sitting back down) I believed her. I had heard a great many old people say the same thing and it seemed to me they ought to know. So I sat there calmly in the hot, crowded church, waiting for Jesus to come to me.

**Voice 2:** The preacher preached a wonderful rhythmical sermon, all moans and shouts and lonely cries and dire pictures of hell, and then he sang a song about the ninety and nine safe in the fold, but one little lamb was left out in the cold. Then he said:

**Voice 3:** (leaning into the bench) "Won't you come? Won't you come to Jesus? Young lambs, won't you come?"

**Young Langston:** And he held out his arms to all us young sinners there on the mourners' bench. And the little girls cried. And some of them jumped up and went to Jesus right away. But most of us just sat there. Still I kept waiting to *see* Jesus.

**Adult Langston:** Finally all the young people had gone to the altar and were saved, but one boy and me. He was a rounder's son named Westley. Westley and I were surrounded by sisters and deacons praying.

**Young Langston:** It was very hot in the church, and getting late now. Finally Westley said to me in a whisper:

**Voice 1:** "God damn! I'm tired o' sitting here. Let's get up and be saved." (*walks upstage*)

**Adult Langston:** So he got up and was saved. Then I was left all alone on the mourners' bench. My aunt came and knelt at my knees and cried, while prayers and song swirled all around me in the little church. The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of moans and voices. And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting - but he didn't come.

**Young Langston:** I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing! I wanted something to happen to me, but nothing happened. I heard the songs and the minister saying:

**Voice 3:** "Why don't you come? (*looking down at YL*) My dear child, why don't you come to Jesus? Jesus is waiting for you. He wants you. Why don't you come? (*turning to voice 2*) Sister Reed, what is this child's name?"

**Voice 2:** "Langston"

**Voice 3:** (*sitting on bench with YL*) "Langston, why don't you come? Why don't you come and be saved? Oh, Lamb of God! Why don't you come?"

**V1, V2, AL:** Oh, Lamb of God!

**Adult Langston:** Now it was really getting late. I began to be ashamed of myself, holding everything up so long. I began to wonder what God thought about Westley, (*turn to look at Westley, voice 1*) who certainly hadn't seen Jesus either, but who was now sitting proudly on the platform, swinging his knickerbockered legs and grinning down at me, surrounded by deacons and old women on their knees praying. God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple. So I decided that maybe to save further trouble, I'd better lie, too, and say that Jesus had come, and get up and be saved.

**Young Langston:** (*standing*) So I got up.

**V1, V2, V3, AL:** Amen!

**Young Langston:** Suddenly the whole room broke into a sea of shouting, as they saw me rise. Waves of rejoicing swept the place. Women leaped in the air. My aunt threw her arms around me. (*voice 2- perform this action*) The minister took me by the hand and led me to the platform. (*Voice 3 perform this action*)

**Adult Langston:** (*Young Langston, perform these actions as adult Langston narrates.*) That night, for the first time in my life but one for I was a big boy twelve years old - I cried. I cried, in bed alone, and couldn't stop. I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell [my aunt] that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn't come to help me.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Performance Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Performing Memoirs: Student Directions

### Recommended Texts (for senior narrative unit):

- David Sedaris's "Genetic Engineering"
- Amy Tan's "Mother Tongue"
- Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (excerpt)
- Mary Higgins Clark's "The F. is for Fascinating"
- Sherman Alexie's "Superman and Me"
- Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle* (excerpt)
- Dave Barry's "Lost in the Kitchen"

### Recommended process:

- **Step 1: Close Reading:** Each student should highlight or underline the most important lines of the text
- **Step 2: Compile Lines:** Create a document with the lines in order while narrowing your focus.
- **Step 3:** Consider the "characters" in the narrative and decide how you want to represent these  
*Example:* Notice that for "Salvation", I've created an "Adult Langston" to narrate some of the lengthier reflections and a "young Langston" to speak and embody the actions that take place "in the moment".
- **Step 4: Excess and Emphasis:** Perform a rough read and remove any lines that are nonessential and highlight or bold lines that you think you may want to repeat or give emphasis to.  
*Example:* I have multiple voices yelling out: "Oh, Lamb of God!" and "Amen" to emphasize the yearning of the elders in the church. While Langston is the narrator in the entire text, dialogue and some other general lines are said by other characters to create interest.
- **Step 5: Staging:** Determine placement of characters and physical movement/ interaction between them; add props/ costuming if necessary
- **Step 6: Rehearse,** rehearse, rehearse!

**Adaptation Strategies for Using Live Performance to Explore Narrative Fiction**  
**Developed by Matthew Spangler, San Jose State University**

1. For third person narration, fuse the narration with the point(s) of view of the character(s). If you use this strategy, the narration would be said from one of the characters on stage, serving as a kind of internal monologue. As a director, you would need to decide if you want to leave the language in the third person tense or change it to first person. Likewise, you will need to decide if the character speaks to the audience with a point of view that matches his or her emotions at that particular moment in the story or if he or she is speaking from a future moment looking back.

a. Examples: “She Wouldn’t Even Hurt a Fly” in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* or “The Hard Goodbye” in Quentin Tarantino’s *Sin City*

2. For third person narration, create a separate narrator character, outside the story itself. Then there would be two actors playing the same character. In literature, this strategy is sometimes adapted into a “frame story” in which a story happens within another story. If using this strategy, start by asking who would want to tell this story and why? Who would want to hear it? What is the narrator’s attitude toward the story’s characters and events? A novel about teens working on a group project at a friend’s house could be transformed on stage if the narrator were a nosey neighbor. Or perhaps the narrator is an older version of one of the characters in the story? Or perhaps a jealous outsider?

a. Examples: in literature, the narrator in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; in theater, the narrator in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*

3. For first person narration, split the narration into two or more “I” voices. Start by identifying the contradictions in the narrator’s voice and create separate characters from these contradictions. A common strategy is to create an older and younger self, but the split could be based on any division within the character.

a. Examples: John Green’s YouTube videos on history, such as “The Agricultural Revolution”

4. For first person narration, keep a single character-narrator without a split. The narrator moves between speaking to the audience and playing moments of dialogue with other characters on stage. Think of the relationship between soliloquy and dialogue in Shakespeare’s plays.

a. Examples: Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy

5. For first or third person narration, use your body to create images. Tell the story through a series of three visual images created with your bodies. You should give each image a title that will serve to distinguish it from the others and tie it back to the story.

a. Examples: In image number one, two actors hug while a third actor stands off to the side. One of the actors in the embrace says, “Home.” In image two, one actor leaves the embrace and hugs the third actor and says, “Away.” In image three, the first actor (the one left alone) crawls into a ball on the floor and tries to make herself as small as possible, while the other two actors face out and hold hands, as if preparing for a new life together. Together, they say, “Together.” The actor on the floor says, “Forgotten.”

6. For first or third person narration, create a choral scripting. This is different from the other strategies in that there is relatively little, or maybe even no consideration of character. Instead of a focus on character, the script is written based on the musicality and rhythm of language, like a piece of music, with the actors’ voices being the musical instruments. Repetition can be very effective.

a. Examples: an adaptation of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*