

KRISTINA WONG, SWEATSHOP OVERLORD

RESOURCE AND ACTIVITY GUIDE

23 SEASON
24

SEASON 57



A.C.T. AMERICAN
CONSERVATORY
THEATER

THIS IS YOUR THEATER,
SAN FRANCISCO

WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY KRISTINA WONG
DIRECTED BY CHAY YEW

WELCOME!

American Conservatory Theater's Education & Community Programs Department is delighted to welcome you and your students into the dark, witty world of *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord*.

This guide was created in February 2024 by Lauren Tannous, with design by Dani Karonis.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Prepare for the experience of *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord* using these materials to understand and reflect upon the show's main ideas and themes. Although parts of this guide focus on ways teachers can prepare students for the show, there's something in here for every audience member who wants a deeper dive.

All hyperlinked materials and websites are click-able in the PDF version of the guide, available at act-sf.org/SweatshopOverlord.

Teachers: consider your curriculum, your own perspective, and how your students might engage with this information, then adjust the content as you see fit. Choose your own adventure and adapt the activities for your students' grade level, capacity, interests, and needs.

Please reach out to education@act-sf.org if you have any questions or support needs. We hope you enjoy the show!

NATIONAL ARTS STANDARDS ADDRESSED IN THIS GUIDE

<https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/>

- **Creating:** Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work - CR1, CR2, CR3.
 - CR1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work
 - CR2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work
 - CR3: Refine and complete artistic work
- **Performing/Presenting/Producing:** Realizing artistic ideas and work through interpretation and presentation - PR4, PR6.
 - PR4: Analyze, interpret and select artistic work for presentation.
 - PR6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
- **Responding:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning - RE7, RE8.
 - RE7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.
 - RE8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- **Connecting:** Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context - CN10, CN11.
 - CN10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
 - C11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

PAM
MACKINNON
Artistic Director

JENNIFER
BIELSTEIN
Executive Director



PRESENTS

**KRISTINA WONG,
SWEATSHOP OVERLORD**

Written and Performed by Kristina Wong
Directed by Chay Yew

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**In memoriam

KRISTINA WONG, SWEATSHOP OVERLORD

WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY **KRISTINA WONG**
DIRECTED BY **CHAY YEW**

STAGE MANAGEMENT

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CHRISTINA HOGAN ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

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LOUISA LISKA DIRECTOR OF GENERAL MANAGEMENT
& OPERATIONS
AMY DALBA GENERAL MANAGER
MARTIN BARRON DIRECTOR OF PRODUCTION

Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord had its World Premiere at New York Theatre Workshop
Jim Nicola, Artistic Director, Jeremy Blocker, Managing Director, 2021

The actor and stage managers employed in this production are members of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers in the United States.

Recording notice: The videotaping or making of electronic or other audio and/or visual recordings of this production, or distributing recordings on any medium, including the internet, is strictly prohibited.

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ABOUT THE PLAY

SYNOPSIS

On Day 3 of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kristina Wong began sewing masks out of old bedsheets and bra straps on her Hello Kitty sewing machine. Before long, she was leading the Auntie Sewing Squad, a work-from-home sweatshop of hundreds of volunteers—including children and her own mother—to fix the U.S. public health care system while in quarantine. It was a feminist care utopia forming in the midst of crisis. Or was it a mutual aid doomsday cult? The answer to that question is something you'll have to decide for yourself as Kristina takes you through this capital-H-Hilarious journey in this Pulitzer finalist play.

THEMES

Relationships	Violence	Social Justice
Human Connection	Poverty	Racism
Identity	Trauma	Mental Health

CONSIDER FOR STUDENTS:

Which themes are familiar to you?

What assumptions come to mind when you think about these themes?

What do these themes inspire or help you to imagine?

CONSIDER FOR EDUCATORS:

How might these themes connect to existing curriculum or classwork?

How might these themes support your social-emotional learning goals?

CONTENT WARNING:

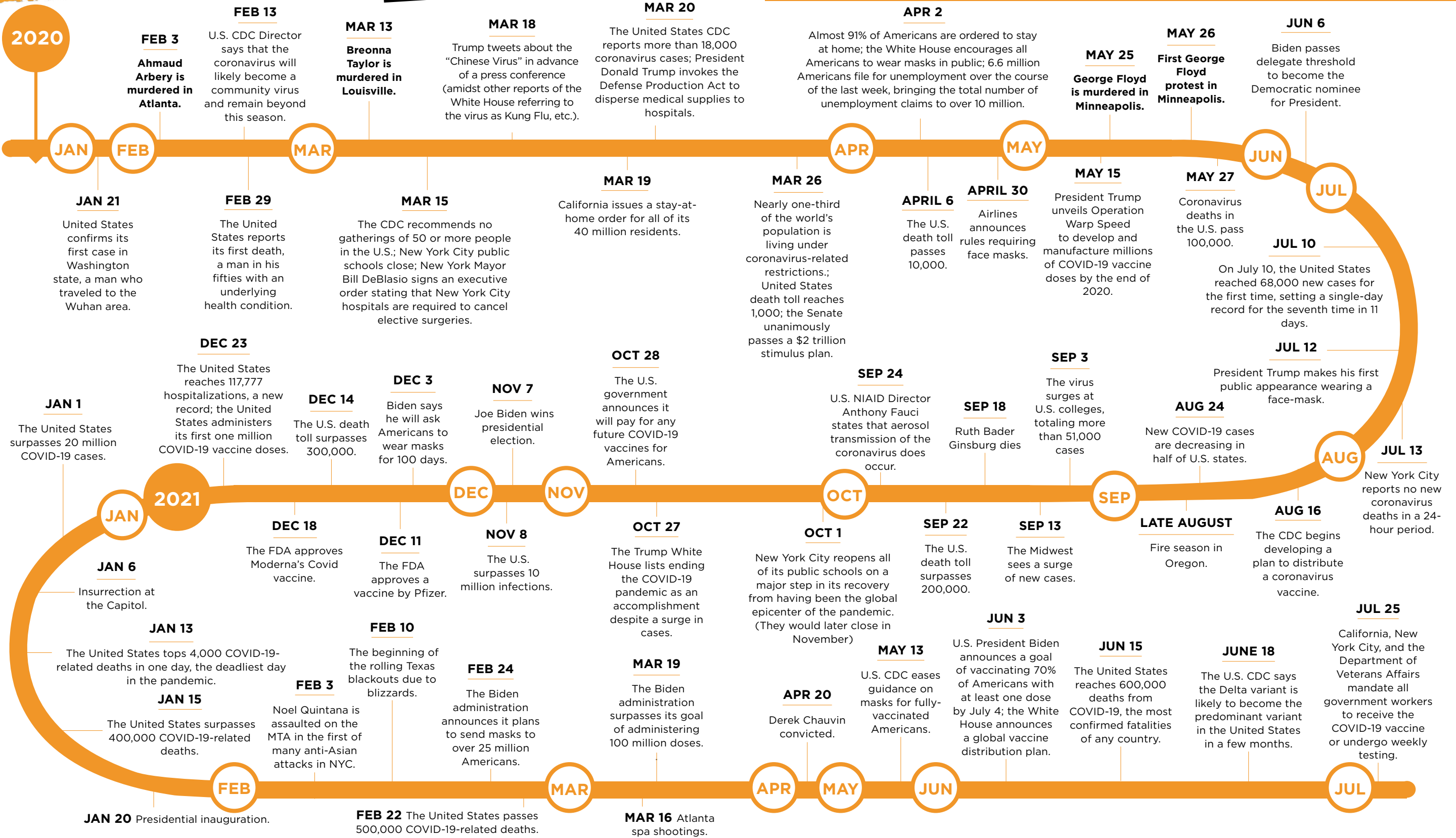
This production includes frequent use of profanity and discussion of trauma, as well as occasional use of racial epithets.

A Timeline of the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020-2021

BY DRAMATURG AARON MALKIN

"I created this timeline as a resource for Kristina when she was writing the original draft of *Sweatshop Overlord* in the summer of 2021. When I made this, we were early in process and looking at a 3 hour piece that only covered March and April of 2020! The timeline eventually grew to include events up to July of 2021, which is when we workshopped the show in advance of its October 2021 premiere at New York Theatre Workshop."

—Aaron Malkin



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What stands out to you? Any specific events?
- Read the description for March 19, 2020-What were you doing that day? What can you remember?
- What events have you lived through that may be mentioned in a future history book? (examples: the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine)

ACTIVITY:

THE “BEST” AND “WORST” OF THE PANDEMIC

Trauma Informed reminder: remember that some students may have had a more traumatic experience during the pandemic and to handle the activity with care.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will explore their personal highlights and lowlights of the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Students will create frozen pictures to represent the “best” and “worst” of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Students will reflect on and deepen their understanding of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on their lives

MATERIALS NEEDED

- None

ACTIVITY

Kristina Wong’s, Sweatshop Overlord takes place during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in March of 2020 and through the weeks and months following. It might feel like a while ago now, but can you remember what your life was like back then? Do you remember what you were doing when everything first shut down? How did you spend your time when everyone was staying at home and “sheltering in place”?

- Divide people into small groups of four or five
- In groups, invite them to take a few minutes to reflect on their experiences of the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Lowlights: What were some of the challenges of that time? How did you respond to those challenges? What were your coping mechanisms?
- Highlights: What were some of the highlights of that time? Did you learn any new skills? Did you create any new connections? Did you discover any new hobbies/interests?
- Each group will create two frozen pictures ([tableaux](#)) representing the “best.” (highlights) and “worst” (lowlights) of the pandemic.
- Everyone in the group must be a part of both images.
- Invite each group to share both images.
- As each image is shared, ask those observing: What do you see? What do you wonder?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How are you holding on to the “best” part of the pandemic?
- Are you still practicing any new skills you learned?
- Who helped you get through those times?
- Are you still connecting with the people you connected with back then?

With special thanks to [Center Theatre Group for some of the activities in this guide.](#)

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY



KRISTINA WONG'S (Writer/Performer) solo plays include *Wong Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Wong Street Journal*, and *Kristina Wong for Public Office*. *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord* premiered at New York Theater Workshop and won the Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle and Lucille Lortel Awards for Outstanding Solo Performance and is a Pulitzer Prize Finalist in Drama. She's a Doris Duke Award Award Winner and Guggenheim Fellow who has been supported by among others, Creative Capital, The MAP Fund, ASU Gammage Artist Residency, Joan D. Firestone Commissioning Fund from En Garde Arts and the Kennedy Center Social Practice Residency. kristinawong.com

[Q&A with Kristina Wong | Creating During Times of Hardship | SAG-AFTRA Foundation Conversations](#)

Kristina Wong shares stories from her performance in 'Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord' in this conversation about her acting career. She also shares her time during the pandemic and the creation of her project 'Auntie Sewing Squad' in this career spanning discussion moderated by Perri Nemiroff, Collider. (36 min, 5 sec)

[Kristina Wong is the first Asian American Woman to become a Pulitzer Prize Finalist in Drama](#)

An interview with Spectrum news Southern California with Alex Cohen from 5/30/22 about how starting the Auntie Sewing Squad led to "Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord" which led to making Pulitzer History. (7 min, 53 sec)

[Auntie Sewing Squad: Mask-Making Heroes in the Pandemic | KCET](#)

Performance artist Kristina Wong became a "Sweatshop Overlord" (as she cheekily dubbed herself), when she rallied together a grassroots mutual aid network of people who made potentially life-saving facemasks using their sewing machines during the pandemic. She called her network the Auntie Sewing Squad. 800 aunties in 33 states sewed 350,000 masks and gave them to asylum seekers, Indigenous tribes and other vulnerable communities. (6 min, 11 sec)

CULTURAL, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL REFERENCES IN THE SHOW

In *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord*, Wong uses wit and dark humor in her social commentary. Here are a few more things, people, and events brought up in the show that are helpful to know:



1992 LA UPRISINGS: a major outbreak of civil unrest that erupted in response to the acquittal of police officers charged in the beating of Rodney King

ANDREW CUOMO: long-time New York state governor who eventually resigned amidst sexual harassment allegations

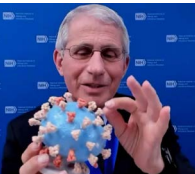
- **ANTI-VAXXERS:** a group of people who believe vaccines do not work or are not safe and refuse vaccines for themselves and their children
- **BANANA REPUBLIC:** phrase that refers to any country with a leader who relies on the military and destroys state institutions in order to maintain power



BLACK LIVES MATTER: a grassroots movement founded in 2013, dedicated to eradicating White supremacy and anti-Black violence

CBD: cannabidiol, a chemical usually sold as an oil or extract derived from hemp or marijuana that has been touted for a wide variety of health problems

- **CDC:** The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, a federal agency established to save lives and protect people from health threats
- **CONTAGION:** a 2011 Netflix film, starring Matt Damon, about a deadly global virus
- **DON CORLEONE:** the head of the Maa family in the fictitious novel and film “The Godfather”
- **“DRINK THE KOOL AID”:** an expression that refers to blindly accepting something or obeying someone without thought or criticism



FAUCI: Dr. Anthony Fauci, iconic physician and immunologist who served on the White House Coronavirus Task Force

FEMA: the Federal Emergency Management Agency, a federal agency established to help people before, during, and after disasters

- **JOHN WAYNE GACY:** a serial killer and rapist nicknamed “the Killer Clown”
- **JOY LUCK CLUB:** a best-selling novel that focuses on the conflicts of Chinese immigrant mothers and their American-raised daughters, later made into a film and a play
- **PYRAMID SCHEME:** a fraudulent business model in which participants make money by recruiting new members



ROSIE THE RIVETER: iconic image of the “working woman”

QANON: a political conspiracy theory/movement that falsely claims that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles that President Trump was recruited to bring to justice

THE SILK ROAD: a vast collection of trade routes that linked Ancient China to the Middle East, East Africa, and Europe

- **YELLOW PERIL:** originated in the 1800s, the racist idea that Asians pose an existential threat to the Western way of life

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Are any of these references familiar to you?
- Are any of these references new to you?
- Which references are you curious to learn more about?

AUNTIE SEWING SQUAD



“We are a national collective of volunteers of all genders who have turned our living rooms into “sweatshops” because of the failure of the Federal Government to provide proper PPE to essential workers and vulnerable communities.”

[-Auntie Sewing Squad](#)

In 2020, Kristina Wong was getting ready to go on tour when, like so many others, was left in theater limbo, deemed “non-essential,” and left grappling with how she could help during the pandemic—cue the Auntie Sewing Squad!

In response to the growing pandemic and the federal government’s slow response to provide proper PPE (personal protective equipment, i.e. masks) to essential workers and vulnerable communities, Kristina decided to use her sewing skills to make a difference and make masks for those in need. She quickly learned that she could not meet demand on her own, so she turned to social media to find like minded folks eager to take up the cause.

Seventeen months, hundreds of volunteers across the country, and 350k masks plus many mutual aid relief vans later— they became the national mutual aid network that is the Auntie Sewing Squad.

In many cultures, “auntie” is used as a sign of respect and affection for women, even without familial relations. While most members are Asian-American women, there are also “Uncles” and non-binary volunteers, and members from a variety of ethnicities and races. Since everyone involved in the Auntie Sewing Squad is a volunteer, they are also supported by “Care Aunties,” who provide them with food, community activities (such as Zoom yoga classes), and more.

Now that masks are mass-produced and more available, they can rest, but they recognize that the pandemic is still not over. The organization has not disbanded and it has moved on to other projects, such as working toward systemic change.

Map of the Auntie Sewing Squad



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Are there any “Aunties” in your life? (Reminder they may or may not be related to you, but rather, people who’ve gone out of their way to provide care and community.)
- Why do you think someone would want to be a part of the Auntie Sewing Squad? Why is it needed?
- Why do they continue, even when masks are no longer as needed?
- Have you ever volunteered, provided extra care, or been an “Auntie” to others? This could be for younger OR older people in your life, or even volunteering to help strangers.

Sources:

<https://www.auntiesewingsquad.com/>

<https://www.pcs.org/features/auntie-sewing-squad>

<https://www.kristinawong.com/projects-blog/auntie-sewing-squad>

ACTIVITY: MASK AS A METAPHOR

OBJECTIVES

- Students will activate the idea that an object can represent big ideas/themes
- Students will generate a list of themes that a mask might represent
- Students will connect as they create wishes for one another based on their generated themes

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A paper mask
- A whiteboard or smartboard to notate brainstorm ideas

ACTIVITY

In *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord*, masks are the central objects of the play. Over the course of her story, they transform from things we wear for protection, into symbols of community, caring, and hope. Wong says: “it may not seem like much, but to the person who receives a mask made for them by a complete stranger, I imagine it makes them feel that they matter, that someone cares.” In this activity, we will identify what masks mean to us, and use what we find to connect with one another.

- Explain that the activity is called “Mask as Metaphor” and ask the students to define metaphor: a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract. Students and instructors might come up with examples, such as a rose representing love, or a dog representing loyalty.
- Explain that in *Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord*, masks become symbolic for many of the large ideas of the play: care, community, purpose, and hope.
- Write these words on the board, and brainstorm with students about what else a mask might represent for them, notating as they generate ideas.
- Ask the students to stand (or sit) and make a circle.
- Explain to the group: We’re going to pass a mask around the circle, and as you hand it to your neighbor, you’re going to give it to them with eye contact and with a one or two word wish for them, based on what the object means for you. It can be something that’s on the board, or something that you come up with yourself. So you might give them the mask and say “I wish you good health,” or “I wish that you will be shielded from danger.”

RULES

- The wish must be positive. No curses.
- You can’t repeat anybody else’s wish – we’re going to see how many things one object can represent.
- Nobody can question anybody else’s wish – whatever it means to them is just right.
- Write the wishes shared on the board so they are visible to all.

REFLECTION

- Thanks so much for sharing those wishes with each other. Let’s take a moment to look at all the wishes we generated.
- Take a moment to think about an object that is important to you. What does that object represent to you? Would anyone like to share?

With special thanks to [Center Theatre Group](#) for some of the activities in this guide.

ACTIVITY: MASK OFF

OBJECTIVES

- Students will explore the idea of stereotypes
- Students will identify a mask they can't take off and the metaphoric mask they put on
- Students will understand how stereotypes affect their everyday lives and the adjustments they make to navigate them

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Note cards
- Pens/Pencils

ACTIVITY

In *Sweatshop Overlord*, very early in the show Kristina Wong writes, “this is the mask I can't take off.” The concept of a mask extends past what we put on our faces. Whether it's race, ethnicity, economic standing, or something else, we all have something about ourselves that we can't change or hide that influences how the world and the people in it interact with us.

- Take some time to think about that thing in your life that you can't take off. And think about the stereotypes or implications of that thing.
- Ask the students to share any ideas that come to mind.
- What is the metaphoric mask that you put on to try and change or soften how the world views you—the way you speak, how you stand, what you wear, etc.?
- Distribute notecards and pens/pencils. On one side of the notecard, ask the students to write the mask they can't take off and on the other side, the metaphoric mask they put on. Encourage students to use additional cards if they have more than one idea.
- Collect all the notecards and pass them back to the class so responses remain anonymous. If a student gets their own, they can put it back and grab a different card.
- Ask the students to carefully consider what's written on the cards. In small groups, discuss: What resonates with you? Do you have anything in common with these masks? What might be challenging about wearing these masks? Knowing these are masks worn by your peers, how might you create a more welcoming and understanding environment for them?

While you watch the play, think about the Aunties who came together to make masks to help their communities, and consider the masks they couldn't take off when they walked into the world. Everyone you encounter is wearing the weight of a mask they can't take off. Knowing this, let's give some grace to ourselves and others.

With special thanks to [Center Theatre Group for some of the activities in this guide.](#)

EXTENSION-HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

AAPI (ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS) IN THE BAY AREA

WATCH:

[Bay Area Revelations: Asian American Pioneers \(Full Episode\)](#) (48 min, 3 sec)

DESCRIPTION:

In this installment of our Emmy-award winning documentary series, Bay Area Revelations, we profile how the people of Asia profoundly shaped the modern Bay Area.

The very first Asian immigrant arrived to the Bay Area before the Gold Rush and settled in San Francisco's Chinatown. The people of Asia have been excluded, imprisoned and vilified. Yet, they fought for their right to stay and work here. And, because of that, Asian Americans have made a big impact in Bay Area politics, arts, philanthropy and, of course, cuisine.

Our interviews include former Congressman Mike Honda, a survivor of internment camps; Vivek Ranadivé, the first Indian-American to own an NBA team; the Filipino entrepreneur who made personal computers possible; and the family who opened up the very first Vietnamese restaurant in San Francisco.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS?

What initially brought Chinese people to San Francisco? How were they treated?

What was executive order 9066? What did it entail?

What sorts of things (cuisine, music, etc.) did Asian immigrants bring to the Bay Area? Be specific.

Compare and contrast how people of AAPI descent were treated during the Covid-19 pandemic to how they were treated throughout their time in the Bay Area. What similarities or parallels do you notice? What distinctions and differences do you notice?



COMING TO THE THEATER

PRIOR TO YOUR VISIT

- Read the A.C.T. [“Rules of Play”](#) to learn more about how we hope you arrive, engage and enjoy the show!
- If your students would benefit from additional information about theater etiquette, consider discussing some of the points made by [Blake Theater](#).
- [Double check A.C.T.’s COVID-19 updates](#).
 - If you are feeling unwell, please stay home. If you or a member of your party is experiencing symptoms similar to those of COVID-19 or have had known exposure to someone with COVID-19, please stay home.
- [Learn about ACCESSIBILITY at A.C.T.](#)

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU ARRIVE AT THE THEATER

- Front of House Staff including security personnel, ushers, and house managers are trained to assist guests and ensure that safety measures are followed. If you feel uncomfortable or perceive a risk at any time, please speak with one of these team members.
- Hand sanitizer stations are available throughout the theater.
- During the show, please stay in your seat unless using the restroom.

STUDENT MATINEE PERFORMANCE

If you are seeing Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord during our Student Matinee performance:

- Low cost “SMAT snacks” will be available for purchase.
 - While food and drinks ARE allowed in the theater, we ask that you monitor your students’ noise levels (e.g. quiet down loud candy wrappers) and remind them to clean up after themselves.
- No cell phone use during the performance. No photo, no video.
 - To ensure a positive experience for all in the audience, we kindly request chaperones monitor phone use when your group is in the theater.
- There will be a talkback after the show. Your students will have the opportunity to ask Kristina questions!
 - Please consider staying in the theater for the additional 15-20 minute engagement opportunity. Invite your students to consider their curiosities in advance, and encourage them to participate in the Q&A.



AFTER THE SHOW

- Revisit parts of this guide that you didn't use before, including readings, videos & links, as well as activities and discussion prompts.
- Questions to consider:
 - Ask yourself how you've changed since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. What lasting impact did the pandemic have on you?
 - What are some ways you can help people around you or contribute to your community? What are some things you've done in the past? What are some things you might do in the future?
- Use a "SEE - THINK - WONDER" discussion model:
 - What did you see in the show? What are some memorable moments, and why?
 - What did you think during the show? What were your favorite moments, and why?
 - What do you wonder about the show? What are you still curious about? If you could learn more about anything mentioned in the show, what would you want to know?
- Creative responses:
 - Write a poem or draw a picture that reflects your thoughts or feelings about your time during the Covid-19 lockdown.
 - Create something to send to Kristina (actor & playwright), director, or creative team members of Kristina Wong, Sweatshop Overlord. This could be a letter expressing opinions and asking questions, or it could be a creative response to the show (a poem, a song, a dance, a drawing or a collage).
 - Email it to education@act-sf.org and we will pass it along!

THANK YOU FOR COMING TO A.C.T.

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THE UNFORTUNATES
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THE LAST FIVE YEARS
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