



Signature in the Schools: The Voices on Blackwell Island

Exercise: 10 Days in a Madhouse

Subject(s): Social Studies, English and Theatre

Goals: Students will be able to:

- Synthesize evidence from artifacts and primary and secondary sources to obtain information about events in United States history.
- Create and maintain character traits with body and voice.
- Compare and contrast the use of rhyme, rhythm, sound, imagery, and other literary devices to convey a message and elicit the reader's emotion.
- Describe how theatrical works can entertain, inform, and interpret the human experience.

Show Connection:

The Voices on Blackwell Island is a contemporary adaptation of Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, filled with references to the original text. While you don't need to be familiar with *Ten Days in a Mad-House* to appreciate the play, the play is filled with references to it and the more you know what it's based on, the more of those references you'll catch and the more you'll appreciate the adaptation.

Materials:

- *10 Days in a Madhouse* Edited Excerpts
- 10 Days Criteria Sheet

Set-Up:

Divide the class into three groups and place them in distinct areas of the classroom.

Description:

- *Ten Days in a Mad-House* by American journalist Nellie Bly was based on articles written while Bly was on an undercover assignment for the New York World, feigning insanity at a women's boarding house, to be committed to an insane asylum. She then investigated the reports of brutality and neglect at the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island (now called Roosevelt Island) in New York City. Through a combination of her in depth and personal flair in reporting and the release of

Ten Days in a Mad-House, she ultimately brought a grand jury investigation to the Island as well as a financial increase in the Department of Public Charities and Corrections to New York City.

- Each group of students must theatrically stage their assigned chapters of *10 Days in a Madhouse*. (Group 1: Chapters 1 – 6, Group 2: Chapters 7 – 12, Group 3: Chapters 13 – 17.) Groups must create a 30-45 second long minute piece of theater for each chapter assigned. Groups present their pieces in order, each beginning with a declaration of the chapter's title, so audience members understand what they are about to witness. The transitions between chapter sections should be crisp, clear and theatrical. Everyone in each group must be present "on stage" at least once in each chapter assigned to them. (Do your best as a group, in planning, to avoid not knowing what you need to do next. Write out your duties, what you are supposed to do and when you are supposed to do it. This should be one seamless piece of chapters interwoven together.)
- Some suggestions:
 - » Read through your group's assigned chapters. You may divide and conquer if you want but make sure the group knows the meaning, event and intent of the text and is prepared to create a world with this text. We suggest you read it aloud as a group for the first time through. Highlighting and underlining parts the group finds compelling, exciting, fun or terrifying to put on the stage theatrically. (What do you see, smell, taste, hear, feel? How can you reproduce those sensations through your bodies as performers and physical / audible things you create with your group?)
 - » Let these pieces be theatrical. Let there be a clear beginning, middle and end to each chapter. It's fine to entertain your audience but try and teach us and most importantly elicit feelings from the audience. Identify with your group where the performance area for the piece is. (The front of the room, the entire room, etc.)
- Some requirements for each group:
 - » One chapter, aside from the title introduction, must be entirely silent. Only physical movements and interactions between performers around the space to tell the story of this chapter.
 - » One chapter must feature self produced or generated music, sounds, percussion, etc. No pre-recorded music here. The audio must be generated by your bodies or other objects sourced from the room.
- Pass out the criteria sheets to each group as well as their assigned *10 Days in a Madhouse* Edited Excerpts. Groups are given sufficient time to prepare their piece before presenting them in order, group by group.

Discussion:

- What chapters and sections of the story were the most compelling? Why? How did groups stage and bring the words to life in compelling and unique ways?
- *The Voices on Blackwell Island* is a work of historical fiction. If you could add or find out more information about a particular aspect of the Island and Nellie's time there, what would you want to learn more about? What unheard voices and parts of the story deserve to be heard in your opinion?