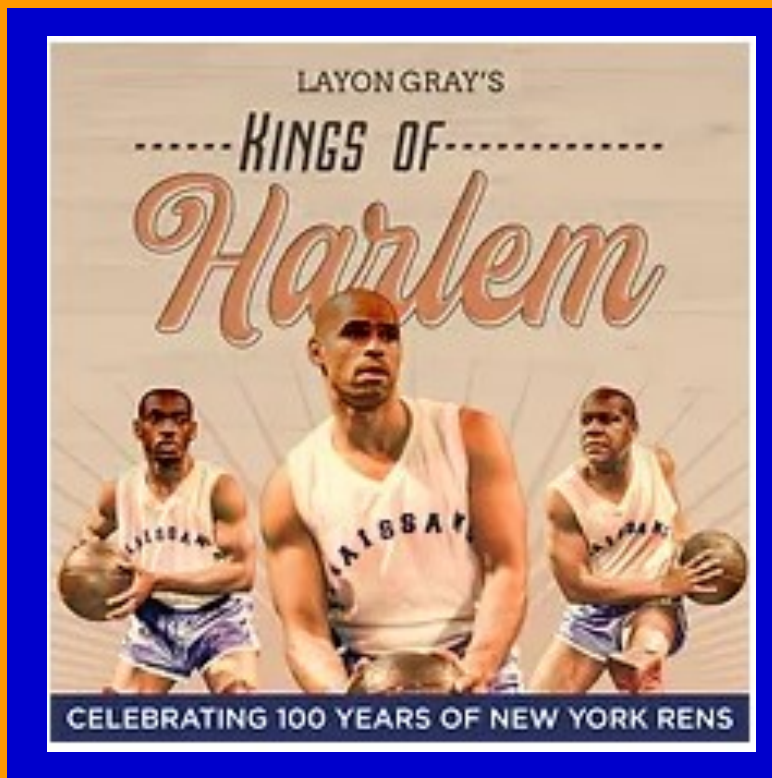




DELAWARE
THEATRE
COMPANY

INSIGHTS

DTC's Teacher Resource



Layon Gray's

KINGS OF HARLEM

Delaware Theatre Company

October 25—November 12, 2023

From the Playwright/Director...

“It’s always the same for me; I always stumble on these ideas. One day, I’ll be on the internet researching interesting things to talk about, to write about. This is again one of those stories that fell into my lap...I had never even heard of this team. I thought the Harlem Globetrotters were the first Black team from Harlem, and then come to find out, the Harlem Globetrotters were from Chicago! . . . Then I started digging more into this New York Rens team, and I found out these guys were the best of their time, from the 1920s to the late ’30s, and no one was telling that story.”

—Layon Gray



Playwright and director Layon Gray will also perform the role of Nat Dozier in Kings of Harlem at Delaware Theatre Company.

INSIGHTS

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Delaware Theatre Company

200 Water Street

Wilmington, DE 19801

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www.delawaretheatre.org

44rd Season

2023-2024

KINGS OF HARLEM

Written and Directed by

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Delaware Theatre Company

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Layon Gray

Delaware Theatre Company thanks the following sponsor for supporting its educational and artistic work.

Delaware Division of the **Arts**

This program is supported, in part, by a grant from the Delaware Division of the Arts, a state agency, in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts. The Division promotes Delaware arts events on www.DelawareScene.com.



Characters and Summary

A Note to Readers: To assist educators in preparing their students for seeing our shows, the Department of Education and Community Engagement at DTC prepares and shares detailed summaries of the plots of our productions. These summaries disclose important plot points, including the climax and resolution of each play. Furthermore, our study guides are constructed under the premise that the educator has read our summary, and additional articles herein may reference these same plot points. This notice is intended to provide a “spoiler alert.”

Characters

The characters are fictional, yet their experiences are based on those of real people, and the facts they refer to in their stories are based in truth.

BENJAMIN COFFEY is a man in his 40s; a storyteller, a historian of family and community, passionate about keeping alive important historical information. A contemporary of today (21st century). Benjamin is the great-grandson of Coach Benjamin "Pops" Coffey.

Benjamin “POPS” COFFEY is the COACH of the New York Rens in the 1930s. Pops is tough but fair, caring about his team, and coaching with the wisdom and passion of great orators of the past.

NAT DOZIER, (CENTER) is the newcomer on the team. From Louisiana, Nat's enthusiasm for the game and the things that bring him joy cause him to overflow in his speech. He is long-winded, but also honest and good-natured.

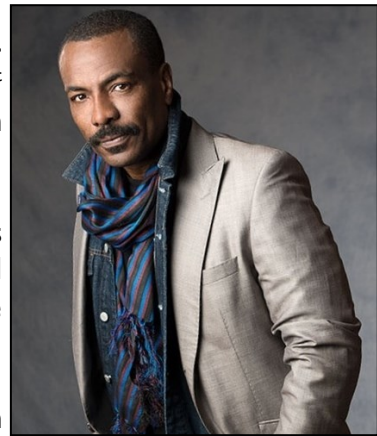
CLEM JOHNSON (GUARD) is another young player on the team. Intense and private, Clem keeps to himself and carries a chip on his shoulder to mask a longstanding pain he feels.

LEROY AMOS (GUARD), another player in his 20s, is from Harlem. He is a great passer, and is genuine. Though he is young, he has been on the team for 5 years.

DEE DEE WITT (FORWARD), another young man, is a hustler, one who loves telling stories, teasing, being the entertainer in the room. He has been with the team for seven years.

JIMMY “JoJo” ROBINSON,(FORWARD) is the oldest player on the team. He is in his late 30s and has been on the team since it started in 1923. He is the leading scorer and still plays well, even against younger, more energetic men.

HOWARD NASH (FORWARD), in his 20s, tries very hard. Even though he is not the best player, he works hard and cares about the team.



Allan Louis, above, plays Coach Pops Coffey, and Thaddeus Daniels, below, performs the role of “JoJo” Robinson in the show.



Characters and Summary (continued)

Summary

The play begins with a basketball team encircling their coach, Benjamin "Pops" Coffey, who is giving them a motivational speech to prepare them for a big game. As he quotes Theodore Roosevelt, the players chime in in unison, signaling that as one, they have embraced the call to action. Time freezes and a spotlight comes up on a contemporary man retelling the story of the New York Rens basketball team and one of its greatest seasons. The man wants people to understand the history of the individuals, the team, and the place that was central to a community and its identity during the Harlem Renaissance.

The focus shifts from the storyteller back to the world of basketball in the late 1930s. A group of players is playing cards before basketball practice. Nathaniel (Nat), a newcomer to the team, enters, seeking Coach Pops Coffey. The veteran players—Jojo, Leroy, Howard, and Dee Dee—welcome him and tease one another about the card game and about their love lives. Pops enters, and, after questioning Nathaniel about his experience and accepting him on the recommendation of another coach, starts the men off on a drill. As Pops leaves the gym for a moment, Clem enters, late for practice. The other players chide him as he hurries to dress out and join in. Pops reenters, and after admonishing Clem about his tardiness, tells the team about their upcoming schedule of games, many of which are against little-known white basketball teams of the South, where Jim Crow laws and practices are still prevalent. The players complain because they want to play the more well-known, well-funded all-white basketball teams, such as the National Basketball League champions the Oshkosh All-Stars. The players tell Nat about the racial discrimination they have faced in the barnstorming tours in the South, but Pops tells them plainly that these are the opportunities for them to earn money playing ball during the Depression. Practice continues, and Pops gets the team to work in synchronization as he reminds them of the rhythms that fill their arena—the rhythms of jazz greats whose music resounds in the Renaissance Ballroom and Casino each evening after the basketball games.



Lamar Cheston performs the role of Leroy in Kings of Harlem at DTC.



Roschaad Milner plays Dee Dee Witt at Delaware Theatre Company.

The scene shifts as an announcer calls the crowd to cheer for the New York Rens basketball team as they take to the court for a game. A choreographed piece suggests the skill, pace, and unity of the team as they win yet another game. A lighting change signals the passage of time, and Pops congratulates the team on winning the Colored League championship. He then shares the news that the owner of the Rens secured a series of exhibition games against the white champions, the Oshkosh All-Stars. The men are excited. As they drift off to celebrate their victory, each has his own plans for the evening. Clem hangs back and sits, reading, in the locker room. Jojo tries to talk to him and offer him help, but Clem lashes out angrily and stomps off. Jojo, alone momentarily, acknowledges pain in his chest. Pops enters and checks on Jojo, who says he is fine. The two reminisce about their old days together, and Jojo thanks Pops for helping him get through his darkest days when his son died. The two discuss a concern for the young player Clem, but both agree not to push Clem emotionally.

(continued)

Characters and Summary (continued)

Summary (continued)



Matrell Smith performs the role of Clem.

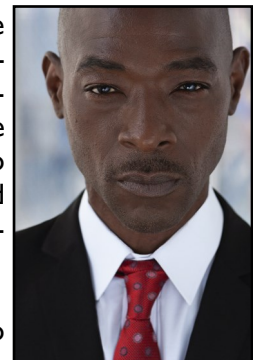
Another time shift occurs, another choreographed routine signifies game play, and the announcer indicates that the New York Rens played poorly in the exhibition games against the white Oshkosh team, losing every game. While the team's ego is bruised, several players shake off the doldrums, ready to move on, but Clem angrily denounces the team's sloppy play. Various members announce they are quitting basketball and moving their lives in a different direction. Soberly, the men begin taking their leave of one another. Clem and Jojo are alone together, and Jojo begins quoting material from the book Clem is reading, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Though the two men briefly connect, Clem refuses to get close to Jojo, rejecting the paternal manner Jojo takes with him. A scuffle breaks out, taking the form of a one-on-one, very physical basketball game. Exhausted, both men begin speaking of their pain; Jojo on the loss of his son to gun violence, and Clem on losing his parents, who were lynched when he was a boy. A new bond develops between Clem and Jojo as they begin to understand the other's pain and loss. Clem

notices Jojo has not seemed as physically fit as before, and Jojo admits to Clem he has a heart condition. He asks Clem not to tell others.

Pops and other teammates enter. Pops excitedly announces that even though the Rens lost to Oshkosh, they have been invited to play in a real basketball championship, where only two black teams—the New York Rens and the Harlem Globetrotters—will be allowed to compete against a field of tough champions from the whites-only league. The team finds a new sense of excitement, and all choose to return to play in the championships. The lights shift, and as a choreographed piece begins to signify game play, and the team is seemingly playing well, Jojo suddenly collapses.

Later that day, the team is experiencing shock and grief as they learn Jojo died. When Clem tells them of his heart condition, the team lashes out at him for not speaking up to Pops or the others about Jojo's health. Clem tries to explain that Jojo did not want to stop playing or share his diagnosis. The men grapple with not wanting to play anymore out of grief and loyalty to Jojo. Then Clem reminds them of their group speech they give before each game, and urges them to play hard to make Jojo's memory proud. The team comes together and decides to play. As the scene fades, Pops is in the same place he was at the beginning of the game, giving his motivational talk, and calling upon the words of Theodore Roosevelt to spur on his team. A choreographed routine signifies game play.

The scene fades to the storyteller Benjamin again, who tells of the Rens' victory and the celebration that followed. After Benjamin gives a statement telling what happened to each player and the coach, he concludes by calling on himself and those around him to make sure that history remains alive through memory and story, passed down to each generation. The lights fade on the team, gathered in unity.



Kenneth Browning, above, and Wallace Demarria round out the cast as Howard and Benjamin, respectively.

Teachable Themes and Topics

The Making of Champions: The New York Rens

The year 2023 marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the New York Rens basketball team, an organization that was the brainchild of a man named Robert “Bob” Douglas, who came to New York from the West Indies at the turn of the century and soon fell in love with the sport that was still in its infancy. After many years of playing the game in gymnasiums with fellow amateurs, he decided to form a team he could coach--the Spartan Braves. Yet the popularity of the sport, as well as the perks offered by many teams to entice star players to join them, meant that a team was only a cluster of individuals who played together often for a short period of time. Douglas, who had an entrepreneurial spirit, knew that attracting and holding onto talent would be a recipe for creating a team who worked together and had a better chance of winning because of their unified approach. Douglas met with fellow West Indian native William Roach, who had built the Harlem Renaissance Ballroom and Casino, and asked if the team could make that space their home court. Eventually Roach agreed, in exchange for shared proceeds, as well as for Douglas’ naming the team the “Renaissance” as a way to advertise for the dance hall.

The New York Rens, also known as the Harlem Renaissance Big Five, were the first all-Black and Black-owned professional basketball team. Owner Douglas served as their coach for their entire existence, and he taught a style of play that was fast-paced, including lots of passing and movement. The style required team members to function as a well-drilled unit. Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, who played against the Rens when he was a member of the Indianapolis Kautskys team in the 1930s, said, “They were the finest exponents of team play I have ever seen...to this day I have never seen a team play better team basketball.” Between 1923 and 1949, when the team disbanded, the Rens compiled an overall record of 2,318 wins and only 381 losses, and once won 88 games in a row—a record that is still unbroken in professional basketball.

During the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance, the Renaissance Big Five played other well-known teams and packed the Renaissance Ballroom & Casino on Saturday nights. But as the Great Depression took hold and money for entertainment became scarce, theatres and dance clubs suffered as many people struggled simply to make ends meet. Rather than quit, Douglas had the idea to take his team on the road, playing games anywhere that would pay his men. Many of these “barnstorming” trips took his team to the South, where the spectacle of a white-versus-black competition might still draw a paying crowd. Yet the communities in which they played were steeped in the practice of segregation and racial discrimination. Sometimes communities refused hotel and restaurant service to the players. The team was frequently subjected to insults from opposing fans who had come to see them lose. But when the Rens won—which happened more frequently than not—often the players were threatened with violence.

Segregation and racism were not just found in the South. The American Basketball League (ABL), known as the first professional basketball league in the United States and formed in 1925, was founded by sports magnate Joseph Carr, who also worked to create the NFL and worked in Major League Baseball in the 1930s. Teams were sponsored by other wealthy men in the Midwest and East Coast, and the ABL’s organization and funding meant that the teams could hire the best players and play in the best arenas, offering structure for the team schedules, and winning payouts for champions of the league. Yet the ABL did not allow Black players to compete, so the New York Rens and other all-Black teams were shut out of the organization.

(continued)

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

The Making of Champions: The New York Rens (continued)

All of that changed in 1939. As the Rens' reputation for excellence became more well-known throughout the sport, sports promoters Harry Hannin and Harry Wilson and the *Chicago Herald American* newspaper created the first World Basketball Tournament Championship, which would be the first integrated professional basketball championship tournament. The winning team would win \$10,000 and be named the best basketball team in the world. Ten teams of white players with championship records were invited, as were the Harlem Globetrotters and the New York Rens, two all-Black teams. An early-round game matched the Globetrotters against the Rens, and the Rens won. The final round pitted the Rens against the Oshkosh All-Stars, the reigning champions of the all-white National Basketball League. When the Rens won 34-25, they became known as the best team in basketball.

By the time the NBA was founded in the late 1940s, it was clear that a whites-only policy would eliminate some of the best players from the sport. And in 1950, the NBA became integrated as Chuck Cooper, Earl Lloyd, and Nathaniel "Sweetwater" Clifton—himself a former New York Ren—were signed to play. The Rens and other Black Fives teams eventually disbanded, but their legacy lives on. The entire 1939 New York Rens team was inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame in 1963, and founder and coach Douglas was enshrined in the Hall of Fame in 1972, the first Black individual to earn that honor. Douglas, for his vision, dedication, and genius as a player, coach, and promoter—is now known as the “Father of Black Professional Basketball.”



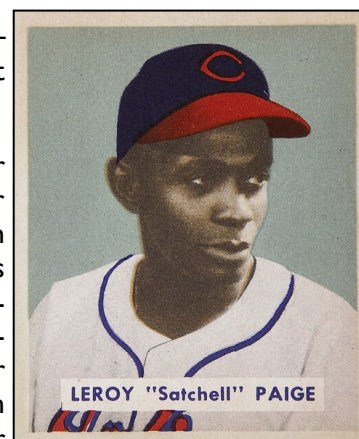
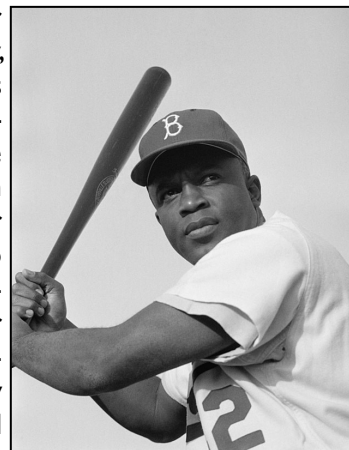
The New York Rens, as seen in this photo, were inducted as a team into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame.

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Segregation and Integration in Professional Sports

Shaquille O’Neill, LeBron James, Michael Jordan, and Charles Barkley... these are names of some of the National Basketball Association’s (NBA’s) greatest basketball players of the late 20th and the 21st centuries. But these outstanding athletes would not have been allowed to compete in the NBA when it was formed in the 1940s, for as seen in Layon Gray’s *Kings of Harlem*, the racial segregation that permeated the United States due to “Jim Crow” laws and discriminatory practices kept Black Americans from participating in many aspects of professional sports. Indeed, segregation was widely practiced for decades in all major sports in the United States, including the NBA, the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and the National Hockey League (NHL)—America’s “Big Four” professional sports. In each sport, there were separate teams, leagues, and championships formed to create and maintain the barriers between races. And while Jackie Robinson’s journey into the Major Leagues is a story most contemporary baseball fans know, there were other similar pioneers in the sporting world who helped break down these barriers and integrate professional athletic competition.

Jackie Robinson is known worldwide for having broken the color barrier in Major League Baseball in 1947. Following Robinson was Larry Doby, who played for the Cleveland Indians, along with other greats such as Hall of Famer Satchell Paige. Previously, Black professional baseball players competed in a separate league, known as the Negro League, where other great athletes such as Smokey Joe Williams, Cool Papa Bell, Josh Gibson, and Wilmington, Delaware’s Judy Johnson, thrilled fans with their dazzling play on the field. And though there was an established Negro League in baseball, there were also barnstorming tours in which exhibition games were played between Negro League teams and white Major League teams. The skills of players like Gibson and Bell did not go unnoticed in these games. And as Brooklyn Dodgers manager Branch Rickey noted in signing former Negro Leaguer Robinson to the farm team, “I signed him because I knew of no reason why I shouldn’t. I want to win baseball games, and baseball is a game that is played by human beings.” Jackie Robinson’s number, 42, has been retired—a sign of respect—across every team in Major League Baseball as a tribute to him and what he did for the sport.



Jackie Robinson, above, and Satchell Paige.

In 1946, a year before Robinson broke Major League Baseball’s color barrier, four Black men did the same for professional football. The color barrier that existed in professional football was not a matter of written policy, but rather an institutional practice that stopped Black players from entering the leagues during the Jim Crow era when they had previously been part of the game. Fritz Pollard and Bobby Marshall were African American athletes. In 1920, Marshall played professional football for the Rock Island Independents, and Pollard did the same for the Akron Pros in the American Professional Football Association, which was later renamed the National Football League. Pollard was an outstanding player and continued playing and coaching for years. A handful of other Black athletes also played during the 1920s and early 1930s. However, an unwritten “gentleman’s agreement” in the 1933-1934 season prohibited

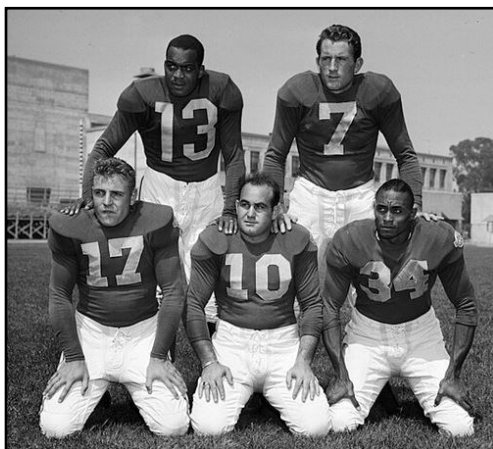
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Teachable Themes and Topics *(continued)*

Segregation and Integration in Professional Sports *(continued)*

the signing of Black athletes in the NFL, effectively ending the careers of the few remaining Black players in the game, and making professional football a whites-only organization for 12 years. But in 1946, when the Los Angeles Rams appealed to a taxpayer-funded commission as they sought to play in the L.A. Memorial Coliseum, Black sportswriter William Halley Harding questioned whether the Rams—or any professional football team—were willing to sign Black players to the team. The commission agreed that the team must integrate if it wanted to play in the Coliseum. UCLA football stars Kenny Washington and Woody Strode were signed to the Rams. That same year, the Cleveland Browns of the All-American Football Conference (AAFC) signed Marion Motley and Bill Willis to their team. The four men were standouts on the field, yet they still experienced taunting and racial abuse during their careers—sometimes from players on opposing teams. Strode left after one season, disgusted with the way he had been treated at times, and went on to a successful career as an actor. Washington, Motley, and Willis stayed for multiple seasons, with Motley once saying, “While they were [calling us names], I was running for touchdowns.” Willis, too, noted that they eventually won the respect of their opponents. Strode, Washington, Willis, and Motley opened doors for Black athletes in professional football and changed the game for the better.

The National Hockey League did not see its first Black player until 1958, when the Boston Bruins called up Willie O’Ree in place of an injured player. O’Ree, a Canadian hockey player who had been playing for the Quebec Aces, a minor league team, played in just two games for the Bruins that season before being sent back down to the minors; however, he was brought back to the Bruins for the 1960-61 season, playing left wing, scoring four goals with ten assists, and doing it all while blind in one eye, an injury he suffered years earlier and kept hidden from his teams. O’Ree endured racial harassment while playing, but later said, “I will never forget how my teammates in the Bruins locker room accepted me as one of their own. This was a time when some of the fans and opposing players were not ready to see a Black man in the NHL.” And, in fact, it wasn’t until 1974 when the NHL’s second Black player, Mike Marson, hit the ice for the Washington Capitals. In more recent decades, more and more players of color have filled the ranks of the teams in the National Hockey League, including all-stars such as Grant Fuhr and Tony McKegney. O’Ree’s influence as the first Black player in the league has gone beyond his time on the ice, as in 1998 the NHL hired him as the Director of Youth Development for its diversity task force, a non-profit program that encourages minority youth to play hockey. O’Ree was elected to the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2018. *(continued)*



Above left: Kenny Washington (top left), Woody Strode (bottom right), and teammates from UCLA’s football team. Above right: Cleveland Browns’ players Bill Willis and Marion Motley’s names and numbers are recognized in the Browns’ “Ring of Honor.”

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Segregation and Integration in Professional Sports (continued)

As seen in *Kings of Harlem*, there were separate basketball leagues for whites and Blacks during the early decades of the 20th century. Teams like the New York Rens played other “colored league” teams, vying for championships in a very loosely-structured league that relied primarily on win-loss record. Known as “The Black Fives,” for the five starters on the court playing, these teams were often sponsored by churches, community centers, and even ballrooms, where the large open space was suited for both a basketball game and a dance hall. The Black Fives also often traveled the country in barnstorming tours to play against white teams from smaller leagues as more of a spectacle than an organized competitive league. But the highly successful Rens were invited in 1939 to compete in the World Professional Basketball Tournament, a precursor to today’s NBA championship playoffs, where they--along with the Harlem Globetrotters--took to the court against the 10 top white teams in the country. The Rens won that tournament, drawing attention across the sport to the Rens and their talents in the game. Though the tournament was a groundbreaking moment in the journey towards racial integration of the sport, it wasn’t until 1950 when Chuck Cooper, Nathaniel “Sweetwater” Clifton, and Earl Lloyd, three African-American players, were signed into the four-year-old NBA, playing for the Boston Celtics, the New York Knicks, and the Washington Capitols basketball teams, respectively. These three men, as well as the members of the Rens and other Black Five teams, paved the way for athletes like Michael Jordan, Shaquille O’Neill, and LeBron James to play the game and define greatness in the sport.



Basketball great Earl Lloyd greets then-Vice President Joe Biden at the White House in 2010. .

The Big Four professional sports in America--baseball, football, hockey, and basketball--all featured discriminatory practices in their early days, mirroring the racial discrimination that pervaded the country. Yet the skill and perseverance of Black athletes, along with changes in the laws and systems that perpetuated segregation, led to sweeping changes in professional sports, allowing athletes of all races and ethnicities to compete together at the highest level.



Willie O'Ree, the first Black player in the NHL, in 1961 along with trainer Len "Johnny" Fletcher.

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Merging Facts and Invention: Historical Fiction in a Play

Kings of Harlem, by Layon Gray, is a work of historical fiction. The characters in the play are fictional characters, and the words each speaks were crafted by Gray to tell a story. Yet the story itself—that of the Rens’ magical 1939 season and its culmination in a groundbreaking opportunity where white and Black basketball players competed together in a historical tournament—is a true story. Often writers of historical fiction recognize that it can be difficult to remain authentic to a real person’s lived experience. Biographical information may be plentiful for some people who were part of a historical moment, and scarce for others. Family lore has significance to a person’s descendants, but may not be able to be corroborated by primary sources. Recognizing these hurdles, but also wanting to capture what Black basketball players of the time really experienced, Gray used facts about real events, real places, and real people to create the world of his play and educate his audience about what it would have been like to be one of these men, playing in this place and this time and in these circumstances. “Creating a whole new character that’s based on facts works perfectly for me. I just use real facts and I create these fictional people,” Gray explains. So although there really were outstanding players and a dedicated coach, the names Jojo Robinson, Benjamin Coffey, and Nat Dozier from the play are created names.

Yet as Gray mentioned, there are real facts woven into the play. The Renaissance Ballroom and Casino was a real place where music, dancing, and, yes, basketball games all happened within the same four walls. Jazz greats like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway really did play at the Renaissance Ballroom and Casino. The New York Rens, the Harlem Globetrotters, and the Oshkosh All-Stars were real teams who played basketball at the time. The real members of the Rens really did come from all across the country, and really did suffer the injustices described in the play. They really did win 88 games in a row in the 1932-1933 season, as the character of Jojo affirms in the play. And there really was the 1939 World Professional Basketball Championship to which they were invited, an event that put Blacks and whites together on the court in a well-publicized, well-funded competition—and that, the Rens won.

All of these facts made their way into Gray’s play in order to create as real a story as possible, while still offering the playwright some leeway in telling a story for the stage in the best way possible. Though most of the words the characters speak are inventions of Gray’s mind, one set of words was taken from text that was well-known at the time: the “Man in the Arena” speech by Theodore Roosevelt. In the play *Kings of Harlem*, Coach Pops Coffey motivates his team by reciting a portion of a speech by Theodore Roosevelt, reminding the players that their honor is in effort. Pops knows that these men have suffered indignities and racial abuse, and he also knows that opposing crowds (and, potentially, other players) will tell them they are not good enough to play against the white champions. But in hearkening to Roosevelt’s speech, Pops authenticates the efforts of the team, underscoring the message that those who criticize from the sidelines but who never themselves get involved are not worthy of consideration. The players, who have heard these words again and again, also begin to recite in unison, showing that they, too, take these words to heart. Roosevelt’s words are these:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and

(continued)

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Merging Facts and Invention: Historical Fiction in a Play (continued)

shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Theodore Roosevelt spoke these words as part of a much longer speech he gave in 1910 at the Sorbonne, a centuries-old university in France, following his tour of Europe. In the speech, he talked of the necessity of hard work for all in order to achieve anything of value. A strong work ethic, a continuous improvement of intellectual and physical fitness, and a commitment to being of strong moral character are three pillars he exhorted as being necessary for humankind to move toward its highest potential. Though the speech is quite long, the paragraph above that is heard in *Kings of Harlem* is possibly the most famous section of the speech, and it is poetically suited for the circumstances of the play. The words remind the team members that though they may face criticism, discrimination, and harassment when they play against white teams, and though they may risk their reputation as champions by playing tough teams and possibly losing games, there is honor in their efforts because they are getting involved rather than sitting down and watching from the sidelines. In this way, playwright Layton Gray uses real historical text that existed and was well-known in 1939 to enrich the created dialogue and messaging in *Kings of Harlem*.

The merging of fact and real-life circumstances with the imagined characters and their words makes for a streamlined play that can unfold with dramatic power on the stage in front of a live audience. This process, in Gray’s words, “...gives me the freedom to create the story like I want to create it.”



Left, Rens memorabilia on display at the LBJ Presidential Library. Above, a close-up of the certificate of election of the Renaissance Team into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame.

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

The Harlem Renaissance

Harlem is a neighborhood on the New York island of Manhattan. Located just north of Central Park, with boundaries on the east of the Harlem River and on the west at the Hudson River, and on the north at 155th Street, Harlem has had a long and rich history, including a starring role during the peak years of the Jazz Age. These years—beginning after World War I and continuing through the 1930s—comprised a brief but shining era known as the Harlem Renaissance.



The word “renaissance,” meaning “rebirth,” signifies a time of great advances and achievements for a community, particularly in terms of education and the arts. And like the Italian Renaissance of the 1500s and the English Renaissance of the late 1500-early 1600s, the Harlem Renaissance saw a cultural explosion as writers, musicians, visual artists, and intellectuals gathered in the same area; creating, performing, and publishing with a zeal; and celebrating and influencing one another’s work. Harlem of the 1920s was the home of poets and writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston (the author quoted by characters Clem and Jojo in the play *Kings of Harlem*). Harlem boasted popular speakeasies, jazz clubs, and great performance halls such as the Savoy Ballroom, the Apollo Theatre, and the Cotton Club, where musicians like “Fats” Waller, Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington delighted audiences. The Renaissance Ballroom and Casino combined the joys of athletics, music, and dance by hosting basketball games followed by an evening of jazz bands and dancing, thus providing patrons for both types of events and creating hours of entertainment for community members to enjoy together.



The Great Depression took its toll, though, on urban areas throughout the 1930s. Across the country, the job market fell apart, and the economic support structure within Harlem, too, began to collapse. Yet there were a few bright spots. Famous jazz artists who once played the popular clubs were able to tour the country and even broaden their appeal through the burgeoning film industry in Hollywood. The world of professional sports, though segregated, still offered some athletes a living doing what they loved, as Coach Pops Coffey reminded his players when they complained about poor conditions they encountered on some of their road trips. But little by little, many of these jazz halls, ballrooms, and community centers fell into disrepair, and Harlem for many years was considered a blighted neighborhood of Manhattan. More recently, however, Harlem has begun enjoying a second renaissance, as new restaurants, shops, and clubs have sprung up alongside neighborhood bars and diners. An eclectic mix of cultures, Harlem today hearkens back to the brightness of the 1920s, bringing not only local patrons together in the community, but also attracting people from midtown, downtown, and beyond.

Musician Cab Calloway, top, and author Zora Neale Hurston were two of the great artists who were well-known figures from the age of the Harlem Renaissance.

Questions for Classroom Discussion

Knowledge and Comprehension

1. Who is the storyteller? How is he connected with the story of the basketball team? What is he trying to accomplish by telling the story?
2. Which player has had the longest career on the Rens? Which player is the newest to the team?
3. Why does Clem keep to himself?
4. What happens the first time the Rens play OshKosh in an exhibition game?
5. What opportunity brings the team back together?
6. What happens in the final game against OshKosh?

Application and Analysis

1. How are JoJo and Clem similar? How are they different?
2. Why does Pops talk so much about jazz music during basketball practice?
3. How do the words of Theodore Roosevelt that the group speaks apply to their situation as players for the New York Rens?
4. Why does the team agree to play in the big tournament towards the end of the play?

Synthesis and Evaluation

1. What are the pros and cons of the Rens' choosing to play in the tournament? What would make them want to play? Not want to play? If you were in their shoes, what would you want to do, and why?
2. What do you see are the important connections between the music played at the Renaissance Ballroom & Casino and the basketball games played there? In other words, how do these very different activities/sources of entertainment have commonality with one another?
3. Can you think of a time when you have had to put yourself and/or your work on display and a positive reception was not guaranteed? What were the circumstances? How did you feel about opening yourself to potential criticism or even "failure" in these circumstances? What made you choose to do it? Looking back, what changes or positive outcomes occurred because of your choice? If you have any regrets, or lessons you learned for yourself for the future, what are they?

Classroom Activities

1. Who are some of the pioneers in the professional sport you are interested in? What makes that person a “pioneer”? Is it that they broke a color barrier, or took on a gender inequity? How did their influence make conditions better for those who came after them in that sport? While looking back at history may be helpful, consider also how more recent developments may have been shaped by players still active in the game. Share your findings with your class as a short play or as a multimedia presentation.

2. The quote “Historical moments are created from historical opportunities,” spoken by the character of Pops Coffey, reminds us that often, an opportunity presents itself and requires that a person step outside of their comfort zone or their normal, everyday practices to take action. Think about historical moments in which individual citizens stood up to take action or to make an important choice that also could have risked their own status quo. Research those people and/or historical moments. What was that person’s life like before this pivotal moment? What spurred them to do something new or different? What was the risk? What was the potential reward or positive outcome they sought? Share your findings with your class.

3. With a partner or a small group, select one aspect of the Harlem Renaissance for further study. Consider sports, literature, visual arts, music, or even politics as a jumping-off point; then explore some of the big names and their works of that time and place. Who were the major players/artists in that arena? From where did they come? How did they end up in Harlem? With whom did they interact? As you gather information about the people involved, look also at their works. Prepare a multimedia presentation of photos, images, or music to share, or stage readings of poems or essays. Share your work with your class.

4. Read poetry and stories that evoke images of the Jazz Age. Some suggested authors include Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Ellison. Then examine visual works by Harlem Renaissance-era artists such as Palmer Hayden and Aaron Douglas. Using quotations that evoke visual images, create a painting, collage, drawing, or other representation of the quotation, setting, or mood evoked by the writing. In sharing your artistic works with your class, explain, too, the inspiration and the choices you made to illuminate that inspiration.

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Page 11—New York Rens memorabilia. LBJ Library, “Get in the Game” Exhibit. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lbjlibrarynow/41507421452/in/album-72157695801887005/>. LBJ Library Photo by Jay Godwin, 2018. Public domain.

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Why Go to the Theatre?

State and National Education Standards Addressed Through Taking Your Students to a Live Theatre Production

When your students view live theatre, they are taking part in a learning experience that engages their minds on many levels. From simple recall and comprehension of the plot of a play or musical to analysis and evaluation of the production elements of a show, students receive and interpret messages communicated through words, movement, music, and other artistic devices. Beyond “I liked it; it was good,” students learn to communicate about the content and performance of an artistic piece and to reflect on their own and others’ emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual points-of-view and responses. And the immediacy of live theatre--the shared moments between actors and audience members in the here-and-now--raises students’ awareness of the power and scope of human connection.

The following educational standards are addressed in a visit to a performance at Delaware Theatre Company along with a pre-show DTC classroom presentation and post-show talkback session at the theatre. *(Additional standards addressed through the use of the study guide or through further classroom study are not included here.)*

Common Core English Language Arts Standards:

Reading: 9-10 and 11-12, Strands 3, 4, 6

Language: 9-10 and 11-12, Strands 3, 4, and 5

National Core Arts Standards—Theatre:

Responding: Anchor Standards 7, 8, and 9

Connecting: Anchor Standard 11

Delaware Standards for English Language Arts (DOE):

Standard 2: 2.2a, 2.4b, 2.5b, 2.5g, 2.6a

Standard 3: 3.1b, 3.3b1, 3.3b2

Standard 4: 4.1a, 4.1b, 4.1c, 4.2f, 4.3a, 4.4b

*Compiled by Johanna Schloss, Associate Director of Education &
Community Engagement, Delaware Theatre Company, 2016*

Teamwork in Theatre = Artists + Audience

Going to the theatre is a wonderful way to experience **TEAMWORK**.

The **ARTISTS** who put on the show—that includes people like actors, musicians, sound designers, costumers, painters, carpenters, and even electricians—are not only involved in the performance, but have often spent weeks or months getting the show ready. That's a lot of work! And there would be no show without the efforts of these artists. They are very important!

The **AUDIENCE** who comes to see the show is also important. There is no show if there is no audience! The actors, musicians, and technicians can practice all they want to, but it takes an audience to turn all that work into a theatre performance!

THEATRE is not the same as a movie or a TV show. Theatre is LIVE in front of you. The actors onstage? They are real people in the room with you! The lights shining onstage? They are controlled by real people in the room with you! The sound of applause during the bows? That comes from real people in the room with you! **Everything anyone does in the room, whether that person is an ARTIST or an AUDIENCE member, affects everyone else.** If an actor decides not to wear his costume, it disrupts the performance, surprises the other actors, and confuses the audience. If an audience member decides to play a video game during the show, it disrupts the performance, creates strange lights and sounds that don't fit in the show, and distracts other audience members and the artists involved with the performance. When you are in the theatre, your words and actions are observed by everyone in the room, and these words and actions can make the theatre experience a good one for everyone else or a bad one for everyone else. This is why **TEAMWORK** is so important in theatre. Everyone in the room needs everyone else to **DO THEIR PART** for the experience to be successful.

What must the ARTISTS do during the theatre performance?

Do the show as rehearsed, and not suddenly change something or surprise other actors or technicians.

Give full attention to your job, whether that is acting or moving scenery or opening a curtain on time.

Give full energy to the performance, showing that you care about what the audience sees and hears.

What must the AUDIENCE do during the theatre performance?

Give full attention to the activity onstage, with no talking during the show, no sleeping, and no playing with or using things like phones, toys, or papers.

Practice courteous behaviors towards other audience members, not making noises during the show, keeping hands and feet to yourself, and staying in your seat rather than distracting others by getting up and down.

Show respect for the place and the people in it by doing things like arriving on time; waiting until after the curtain call to leave; not eating, drinking, or chewing gum in the theatre; and responding to the show in a way that recognizes the efforts of the ARTISTS and the AUDIENCE in making the experience positive.

When ARTISTS and AUDIENCE members all do their part, they show respect for each other and for the work involved in creating theatre. **That mutual respect and the efforts to make the experience a positive one for all add up to make TEAMWORK in the theatre!**