



DELAWARE
THEATRE
COMPANY

INSIGHTS

DTC's Teacher Resource



Dare to Be Black: The Jack Johnson Story

Written and performed by Tommie J. Moore
Directed by Bud Martin

*Delaware Theatre Company
October 25—November 12, 2017*

Words about Jack Johnson

“Jack Johnson was a controversial figure in his time. He challenged racial barriers and taboos. He flaunted his success and his defiance of bigotry. He lived by an ethos – ‘I am not a slave,’ ‘[I] act in my relations with people of other races as if prejudice did not exist’– that was anathema to and feared by many persons in the early 20th Century.

“But he was not a criminal. Mr. Johnson was indicted and convicted on what the Texas State Senate has declared to have been “contrived charges,” in a prosecution that is repugnant to today’s standards of justice and racial equality.”

*—The Committee to Pardon Jack Johnson,
from their Petition to the President of the
United States, dated July 12, 2004.*



Jack Johnson

INSIGHTS

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Delaware Theatre Company

200 Water Street
Wilmington, DE 19801
(302) 594-1100
www.delawaretheatre.org

**39th Season
2017-2018**

DARE TO BE BLACK: The Jack Johnson Story

Written and performed by
Tommie J. Moore

Directed by
Bud Martin

Delaware Theatre Company
Executive Director

Bud Martin

Department of Education and
Community Engagement

Charles Conway, Director
Johanna Schloss, Associate Director
Allie Steele, Assistant Director

Contributing Writers
Johanna Schloss

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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."

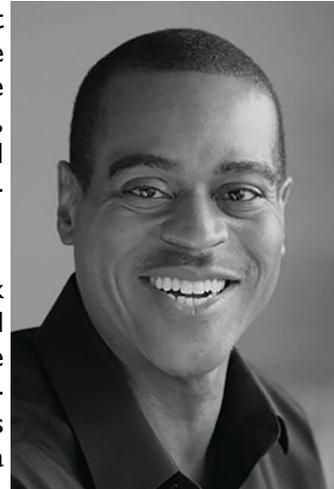
The lone character in the play is **Jack Johnson**, the first black heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Though there is dramatic license in the writing and performing of the play, the stories told by the character are based in the truth of the life of the real Jack Johnson. Johnson is strong, charming, and funny, and enjoys the power of his celebrity image, yet still understands the pain that comes with the racism pervasive in America during his lifetime.

The play unfolds in two acts linked by video footage. In the first act, Jack Johnson addresses the audience directly as though they are reporters and he is leading a press conference before a major fight with Jim Jeffries. He tells the audience/reporters to focus on the means to an end, on his journey to being the world heavyweight boxing champion rather than just his title, offering that it is that venture to reach an end that demonstrates a person's character. He challenges the reporters to step away from racism and write the truth about him and his story.

Johnson tells about his childhood in Galveston, Texas and how he got his start in boxing, the result of a racist prank against him and other black boys. Johnson shares that he learned he had skill and could earn money, though, by embracing his role as a fighter. He relates how his stature in the boxing world grew, and though he earns the unofficial Negro Heavyweight Championship, he was not allowed to fight the white title holder, Jim Jeffries, because of the sport's segregating black and white boxers. Jeffries himself refused to fight Johnson. Johnson explains his growing anger at not being able to have even the opportunity to fight for the title, and he links his desire for getting back at racist individuals and his interest in publicly dating white women.

Johnson identifies another white boxer, a prize fighter named Tommy Burns, who held the heavyweight championship title for a time after Jeffries retired. Burns took on many white boxers but refused a fight with Johnson; however, Burns relented when an Australian promoter offered significant prize money for the event. Johnson relates his experience with the crowd in Sydney as he also relishes his prowess in the ring.

Upon returning to the United States, Johnson and his white girlfriend, Hattie, met with hostility from both whites and blacks about their interracial relationship, so Johnson tells of refusing to move back to Galveston and instead relocating north to Chicago. Johnson further expands on his romantic relationships, acknowledging time he spent with both the well-heeled and the prostitute. He is adamant about finding the pleasures in life. He then tells of meeting Etta Duryea, a woman he says was different from the others in that he truly loved her.

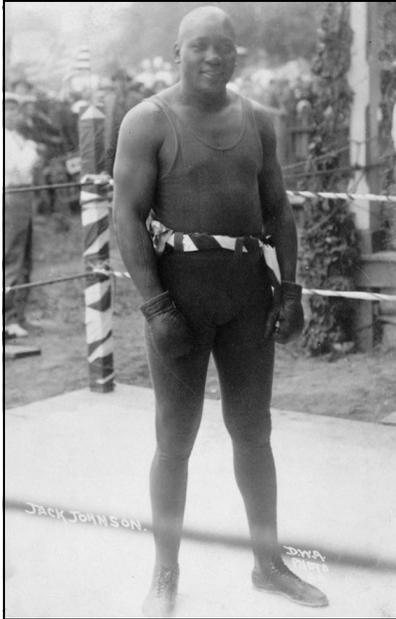


Actor/writer Tommie J. Moore plays Jack Johnson in DTC's production of Dare to Be Black.

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Characters and Summary (continued)

Johnson explains that in the world of boxing, attention turned to finding a “Great White Hope,” a white boxer who could defeat Johnson and restore the title of champion to whites. Again using the metaphor of the audience’s being reporters, Johnson castigates them for calling Jim Jeffries the undisputed heavyweight champion since Jeffries had retired and Johnson was the current champion. The lure of prize money and an offer for a Hollywood film brings Jeffries out of retirement. Johnson vows to win the fight, claim the money, and play the role of Shakespeare’s Othello.



Boxer Jack Johnson stands in the ring.

After a brief pause in the action representing this epic fight, Johnson returns to share his thoughts on Othello and on finding the right woman. Then he recounts details of the fight, at which Johnson defeated Jeffries. Then Johnson details the race riots across the country that followed his victory. Johnson’s bitterness at the ugliness of racism led to his drinking and lashing out, including physically abusing Etta, who suffered from depression. He expresses his remorse at his actions. Though the two reconciled and married, Etta’s depression continued to haunt the couple, and Johnson shares his grief as he tells of Etta’s suicide.

Johnson relates that soon after Etta’s death, he remarried another white woman, Lucille Cameron, and drew the attention of federal prosecutors who eventually charged him with violating the Mann Act, a law originally established to stop human trafficking, especially that which was for the purpose of prostitution. The Mann Act was commonly known as the White Slave Traffic Act. Johnson shares that he believes he was targeted because of his reputation and race and because Lucille, though a willing partner of age, was white. One of Johnson’s previous girlfriends, Belle Schreiber, testified against him. Johnson tells of being found guilty, then shares how he eluded authorities intending to imprison him by leaving the country.

Johnson tells of additional injustices, including the offer of clearing his record in exchange for a fight with a white man. Though Johnson fought, the offer was rescinded. Johnson’s next years were spent in various countries, and though he offered to fight in World War I for the U.S., he was not welcome. Finally, Johnson tells the audience that he chose to return to the U.S. and serve his time in Leavenworth. After his release, Johnson tells of his other relationships and his travels around the country. He reminds the audience of the poem written about him, “Shine.” After Johnson performs the poem, a radio announcer tells of Johnson’s death.

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

The Real Jack Johnson

Tommie Moore's play *Dare to Be Black* is a dramatic presentation of the life and career of real-life boxer Jack Johnson. Though the play does take some creative licenses to convey a real person in a 90-minute stage play, the playwright and actor Moore uses factual information about Johnson, as well as media pieces original to the time and court records as the source material for his work.

The real Jack Johnson, as mentioned in the play, was born in 1878 and grew up in Galveston, Texas, during the heart of the Reconstruction and resulting "Jim Crow law" age. He began boxing at a young age and eventually began earning a living from his winnings. As Moore portrays him in the play, the real Johnson usually won his matches handily and worked towards the title of heavyweight champion in a time when boxing—"prizefighting," then—was a sport that garnered nationwide attention. The sport was segregated, though, and both venues and white champions refused matches with black boxers. When champion Tommy Burns finally agreed to fight and lost to Johnson, Johnson was catapulted into the national spotlight as the first black heavyweight champion.

In an obvious example of the racial inequality and tensions of the early 20th century, after Johnson won the title, the boxing world sought a "Great White Hope," a white contender, to reclaim the championship from a black man. As mentioned in the play, former champion James Jeffries came out of retirement in what was known as the "fight of the century" to take on Johnson. After Johnson won handily, race riots erupted across the country, yet many blacks felt a great sense of pride and accomplishment.



The crowd outside Times Tower waits for news about the result of the fight between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries.

Johnson enjoyed the attention of being champion. He loved the lavish life and enjoyed his celebrity status, even when faced with racial taunts and criticism from whites and from well-known black leaders, including Booker T. Washington. He was unapologetic for his lifestyle, his career, and his choice of white women (including prostitutes) as sexual partners.

As the play notes, Johnson was eventually arrested, tried, and convicted for violating the Mann Act. He and his wife fled the country, but needing income, he eventually returned to the United States and served his one-year sentence. He eventually lost his title and retired from professional boxing, only to find a career as an entertainer on the vaudeville circuit as well as taking small boxing matches in private settings for money. He died in 1946 as a result of injuries sustained in a car crash.

Johnson's legacy includes not only being the first black heavyweight champion, but also demonstrating that sports figures had power in their status as celebrities. The play and subsequent movie *The Great White Hope*, starring James Earl Jones, is based on Johnson's life. Jazz artist Miles Davis created an album honoring Johnson's memory titled *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*. Filmmaker Ken Burns chose Johnson as his subject for illumination in his piece *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. This more recent attention has propelled a movement, joined by Senators John McCain and Harry Reid, as well as the support of the late Senator Edward Kennedy, to have Johnson's legal record cleared because of being unfairly tried and convicted. Jack Johnson, who made headlines over 100 years ago, is still a figure who commands interest and ultimately, the respect he deserved.

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

The Mann Act

The White Slave Traffic Act, officially known as the Mann Act (named for its author, Illinois Congressman James Robert Mann), was signed into law by President William Howard Taft in 1910. The law has been viewed as a product of its time, and though it is still in existence, it has been rewritten to reinforce its greater purpose of prohibiting human trafficking and to remove the vague language that was used to target or blackmail individuals unfairly for legal private relationships. Though there were certainly true offenders who preyed on women, many of them underage girls, and perpetrated sexual crimes against them, a large number of those charged (and frequently convicted) were celebrities or individuals who were specifically targeted as a response to negative public sentiment. Jack Johnson, Charlie Chaplin, and Frank Lloyd Wright are just some of the famous names of men who were charged with violating the Mann Act, though the women with whom they associated were willing adult romantic partners. The original language of the Mann Act made it a crime to transport women across state lines “for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose.” It is the phrase “any other immoral purpose” that was broad enough for authorities to use in arresting and charging people—mostly men, and disproportionately immigrants or men of color—with violating the law.



*Jack Johnson and his second wife,
Lucille Cameron.*

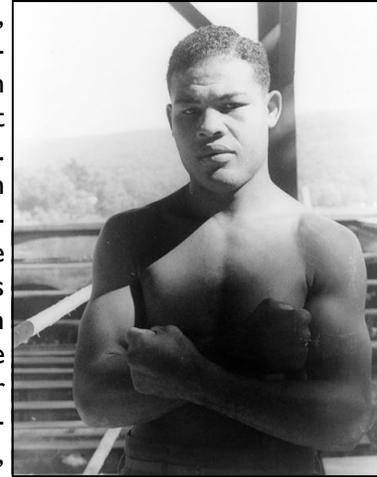
The Mann Act was written in the early 20th century at a time when the fruits of the Industrial Revolution included the proliferation of jobs in factories. For the first time, women in America became a strong presence in the workforce owing to the proliferation of typewriters, sewing machines, and other technological devices that provided widespread job opportunities in urban industrial settings. These factory jobs allowed women to move out of the home, take a regular paying job in a city, and financially support themselves outside of the family sphere. With this change came the stories of physical and moral danger surrounding “innocent women” in the bustling city. Along with this changing role for women was also the continued flow of immigrants to the United States, many of whom also settled in tenements in cities and found work in and around the factories. Muckraking journalists fed off rampant xenophobia and the fear of industry and immorality of the time by publishing sensationalized stories of young women kidnapped (often by foreigners who purportedly had similar ties to insidious crimes in other countries) and forced through an underground network of sex slave traders across the country. The Mann Act of 1910 was a response to the public outcry for protection. Though the newly-created Federal Bureau of Investigation never found evidence of such a network, it made headlines with each arrest of a high-profile individual charged with violating the new law.

The law was upheld in several prominent court cases over the years, but in 1978 and again in 1986 was amended to add protections for minors and to replace ambiguous language. The phrase “any other immoral purpose” was removed and replaced with “any sexual activity for which any person can be charged with a criminal offense,” assuring that spurious charges like those leveled against Jack Johnson were no longer allowed under scope of the Mann Act. And in 2004, filmmaker Ken Burns, among others, filed a petition to the U.S. Department of Justice to have Johnson’s name cleared, citing that the case against him was racially motivated and his subsequent conviction an example of a grave injustice in the legal system. Senator John McCain of Arizona joined the cause requesting a presidential pardon for Jack Johnson. The request still stands, and Johnson remains, in the eyes of the law, a convicted felon for traveling with his white then-girlfriend across state lines.

Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Opening Doors in Professional Sports

When Jack Johnson defeated white boxing champion Tommy Burns, and then successfully defended his title against the former heavyweight champion of the world, white boxer Jim Jeffries, Johnson proved to the boxing community and its fan base that he was not just the black heavyweight champion, but the all-around champion. The racism that he faced prevented him for many years from even competing for the title, and it was not until Burns accepted the challenge of facing a black man that Johnson was able to vie for the championship. After Johnson retired from the sport, though, it was not until 1937 when **Joe Louis** became the next African-American boxer to claim the title of heavyweight champion of the world. One reason for the twenty-plus year gap between championships for black boxers was the negative public sentiment surrounding Johnson's celebrity image. Joe Louis had a different personal style, openly noting his humble beginnings, and rarely displaying the self-assured bravado that made Johnson both loved and hated. While still the heavyweight champion, Louis enlisted in the United States Army during World War II. After the war, he continued boxing and was honored for decades for his achievements. He is buried in Arlington Cemetery.



Joe Louis, heavyweight champion from 1937-1949.



Baseball's legendary Jackie Robinson.

Professional boxing was not the only sport that forced the segregation of athletes of color from the so-called mainstream sport; in fact, Major League Baseball's **Jackie Robinson** was world-famous for breaking the color barrier in our country's national pastime. Throughout the late 1800s, African-Americans played baseball with white players in amateur settings (such as military or college teams) as well as in professional clubs. However, at the turn of the century, Jim Crow laws forcing racial segregation stopped the practice. At first black players formed their own teams and traveled from place to place, like Jack Johnson, looking for and taking on any team who would play them. But by the 1920s, a more organized system came into being as several established teams in the Midwest formed under a new structure, and the Negro National League was born. More leagues were formed around the country, and the Negro League thrived for decades with talented players and a strong fan base. In 1945, Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, recruited Jackie Robinson to be the first black player in Major League Baseball in the modern era, and in 1947, Robinson made his debut. Robinson endured taunts and threats from fans and from some white players who refused to take the field with him. Yet his talent on the field proved that he belonged on the national stage with the other stars of the game at the time. Robinson won Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player awards and was hailed as heroic for his athleticism as well as his strong character in the face of bigotry. His uniform number, 42, has been retired by Major League Baseball in honor of his legacy.

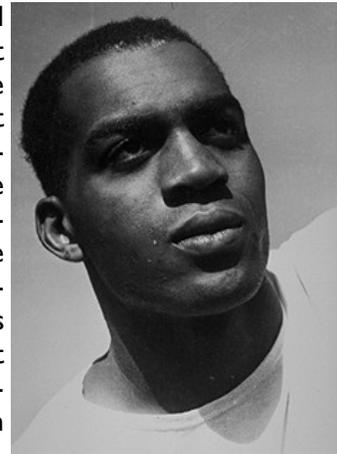
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Teachable Themes and Topics (continued)

Opening Doors in Professional Sports (continued)

Other professional sports had their own Jack Johnsons and Jackie Robinsons who had to face prejudice, segregation, racism, and even gender bias in their careers as they worked towards being integrated into whites-only or males-only systems. Here are a few names of pioneers in professional sports who broke barriers of one sort or another in their quest for inclusion and integration.

Kenny Washington was the first black player in the National Football League, joining the Los Angeles Rams in 1946. Washington insisted that his fellow UCLA football Bruin **Woody Strode** also be invited to the team, and both men played that season. An interesting side note is that Washington was also a baseball standout for the Bruins, carrying a better batting average than his successor as shortstop at UCLA —Jackie Robinson. And Robinson made a name for himself, along with Washington and Strode, on the football field for UCLA, a school where sports were more integrated than most at the time. Though Washington's name is not the household word that Robinson's is, his legacy is recognized as paving the way for others to follow. Washington as yet has not been inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Family members, friends, teammates, fans, and members of the press have been promoting Washington for such an honor, long overdue.



The NFL's Kenny Washington.

Willie O'Ree was the first black player in the National Hockey League, being called up by the Boston Bruins in 1958 to replace an injured player.

O'Ree, who was born in Canada, identified that he endured more racial taunts in the United States early in his career than he did while playing teams in Canada. Though he only played two games his first year in the league, he returned in 1961 and played over 40 games for the Bruins. After leaving the NHL, he continued to play hockey in the minor league system, displaying remarkable skill on the ice. Even more remarkable was that in a sport where the action is quick and precision of play high, O'Ree played nearly blind in one eye, rarely telling others about the hockey injury that took his sight in his right eye in 1956. Though doctors at the time told him his injuries would limit his abilities, O'Ree's commitment to being a professional hockey player led him to double his efforts and ultimately be the man who broke the color barrier in the NHL.

Althea Gibson was the first person of color to compete in the United States National Championships in tennis in 1950. Her celebrated career included ascending into 19 majors finals and winning 11 titles, including five singles titles from matches in the U.S. Nationals, the French Championship, and Wimbledon. As a teenager, she played for the American Tennis Association, an organization established for black players as the equivalent of the whites-only United States Lawn Tennis Association. Gibson took the sport by storm, drawing notice not only of black athletes, but also white players, too. Alice Marble, a four-time U.S. National singles title holder, lobbied for Gibson to be included in the U.S. National competition, writing for a tennis magazine, "If Althea Gibson represents a challenge to the present crop of players, then it's only fair that they meet this challenge on the courts." Gibson's entry into the competition and her first-round victory were historic. She later broke the color barrier at Wimbledon, and in 1957, with her presence on the tennis court now acknowledged as championship material, Gibson made the covers of *Time Magazine* and *Sports Illustrated*.

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An Interview with the Playwright (continued)

Opening Doors in Professional Sports (continued)

Mildred “Babe” Didrikson Zaharias was the first woman to make the cut to play in the previously all-male Professional Golfers Association (PGA) Tour events. A white woman, Didrikson faced gender barriers in seeking to compete with athletes at the highest level. Didrikson qualified for five Olympic track and field events in 1932; however, as a woman, she was only allowed to compete in three of those five. She was a gold medalist in hurdles and javelin and a silver medalist in high jump. After the Olympics, Didrikson found a new sport that attracted her, golf, and made the cut to play in the Los Angeles Open, a PGA Tour event, in 1938, becoming the first woman to do so. Similar to Jack Johnson, she was competitive and spoke confidently of her athletic talents, often making her the target of those who thought she did not belong in the sports world. She met with derision for her athleticism, and open criticism of her sexuality, until she married wrestler George Zaharias and modified her public persona to be more feminine. After her untimely death from cancer in 1956, Babe Didrikson Zaharias was honored posthumously with the Bob Jones award, the United States Golf Association’s highest award, for sportsmanship.



Althea Gibson, left, the first African-American to compete in formerly all-white U.S. National and Wimbledon tennis competitions. Right, Mildred “Babe” Didrikson, whose athleticism challenged views of propriety in male-dominated sports.

Questions for Classroom Discussion

Knowledge and Comprehension

1. In what time period did Jack Johnson live?
2. Why was there such a delay in Johnson's being able to fight for the heavyweight champion of the world?
3. Why was Johnson sentenced to over a year in jail? In other words, what was the crime he was accused of committing?
4. Give two examples of how Johnson faced racism and prejudice in his life.

Application and Analysis

1. What social and cultural influences contributed to Johnson's image in the media?
2. What of Johnson's words and actions contributed to his image in the media?
3. How are Shakespeare's character of Othello and Jack Johnson similar? How are they different?

Synthesis and Evaluation

1. How is the public image of celebrities today similar to the public image of Jack Johnson one hundred years ago?
2. Should celebrities, including sports figures, behave a certain way in public? Why or why not?
3. Former NBA star Charles Barkley said in a 1993 commercial, "I am not a role model. ... Just because I dunk a basketball doesn't mean I should raise your kids." Discuss the concept of sports stars and role models. Is there a responsibility? Should there be? How does this conversation relate to Jack Johnson's story?

Classroom Activities

1. Create a list of men and women who were considered pioneers in their field in terms of breaking a social or cultural barrier. Explore not only sports figures, but also those who worked in other fields such as medicine, arts, science, etc. Then choose one of these people and research his or her life, career, and contributions to society. What barriers were in place when that person first identified an interest in that field? What obstacles did she face and navigate? What abilities or strategies did he use to overcome those obstacles? Create a multimedia presentation and share with your class, or write your own first-person monologue (in the style of *Dare to Be Black*) and perform it for your classmates.

2. How did the Reconstruction Era give way to the “Jim Crow” laws in many states in the late 19th and early 20th centuries? Examine the established systems in place as well as the unwritten but still influential social practices of a community. How and when were these Jim Crow laws repealed? Who were the people who made the change? Share your findings with your class.

3. Poll your classmates, teachers, or friends about their thoughts and feelings on boxing and other combat as a sport. What makes fighting a sport versus an illegal altercation? What led to its becoming a recognized sport? Has public opinion about boxing’s legitimacy as a sport changed over the years? Why or why not? Are there definitions of “sport,” in general, that your classmates and friends can agree on? If so, does boxing fit this definition? What about football? Cheerleading? Golf? Moderate a classroom discussion on the idea of “What is a sport?”

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Page 4—Crowds gathered to hear news of match between Jeffries and Johnson. By The Pictorial News Company, *The New York Times* photo archive. Public Domain, accessed at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2923647>.

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Page 8—Mildred “Babe” Didrikson Zaharias. “Press photo. George Zaharias, Wrestler, of Colo., and bride Mildred Didrikson.” Public domain. Accessed at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Babe_Didrikson_Zaharias_1938.jpg.

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*