



SAN FRANCISCO  
OPERA

## The Marriage of Figaro

### Sample Lesson Plan: Casting in a Color-Blind World?

<b>GRADE LEVELS</b>	High School, 9-12
<b>TIMING</b>	Two 45-minute classes
<b>PRIOR KNOWLEDGE</b>	<p>Some basic familiarity with <i>Carousel</i>, <i>Madame Butterfly</i>; if not, utilize production images to introduce the concept.</p> <p>It would behoove the educator to spend some time researching and strategizing how to discuss race with high school youth. Here is one of many existing resources: <a href="http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/TT%20Difficult%20Conversations%20web.pdf">http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/TT%20Difficult%20Conversations%20web.pdf</a></p>
<b>LESSON OBJECTIVES</b>	<p>In the 2019 production of San Francisco Opera's <i>The Marriage of Figaro</i>, set in the states during Revolutionary War America, the servant characters of Susanna and Figaro are being played by black opera singers, raising the issue of ethnicity-based casting. Through this lesson, students will explore the notion of ethnicity and gender-based casting and its influence on the audience, its importance to storytelling and the intention of the producers/directors in making the choice.</p>
<b>CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS</b>	English Language Arts History/Social Studies
<b>MATERIALS/LINKS</b>	Aida synopsis: <a href="https://www.liveabout.com/verdis-aida-synopsis-723733">https://www.liveabout.com/verdis-aida-synopsis-723733</a> Madame Butterfly synopsis: <a href="https://www.metopera.org/discover/synopses/madama-butterfly/">https://www.metopera.org/discover/synopses/madama-butterfly/</a>
<b>NATIONAL STANDARDS/ STATE STANDARDS</b>	<p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1</u> Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.</p> <p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9</u> Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.</p> <p><u>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C</u> Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.</p>

## INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

**STEP ONE.** Explore the history of ethnicity and gender-based casting

### Trouser Roles/Cross Gender Casting

In early Italian opera, the "castrato" (men castrated before their voices dropped in puberty) were cast in roles requiring very high voices. As this practice faded, women began to play these roles in which the character looks like a woman (albeit dressed and made up like a man) and sounds like a boy. This is commonly described as a trouser role. One of the most famous trouser roles is that of Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro*.

- Since these roles are so common in opera, regular opera goers don't even notice. But for a first-time opera goer, how might they react?
- Research the numerous roles cast as a trouser role. Pick one and compare and contrast it with Cherubino in Marriage of Figaro.

### Cross Ethnic Casting

One of the most famous roles for an ethnically cast black woman is that of the Ethiopian Aida in Verdi's *Aida*. One of the most famous sopranos to perform this role was Leontyne Price who remarked: "My skin is my costume." Other roles in which the character's ethnicity can impact the production are Carmen (Carmen), Princess Eboli (Don Carlos), Delilah (Sampson and Delilah) and Amnerise (*Aida*).

- When San Francisco Opera produced *Aida* in 2016, the white soprano Leah Crocetto performed the titular role. Why does a production company make the decision to cast a white skinned woman in this role? How does it impact the viewing experience?
- When Anna Netrebko took the role of Aida at the New York Metropolitan Opera in 2018, she wore darker make up to appear black. Wearing blackface used to be quite common in opera. Is wearing blackface appropriate today?
- Another opera role which is frequently discussed as to casting is that of Cho-Cho-San in *Madame Butterfly*. Research the opera. Does Cho-Cho-San need to be cast as a Japanese (or Asian) woman? If she is not Asian, how does that impact the story telling?

### Ethnic Casting in Broadway musicals

A recent example of casting in a Broadway musical is with the 2018 Broadway revival of the musical *Carousel* by Rogers and Hammerstein. The entire cast is white except for the characters of Billy Bigelow and Jigger.

Joshua Henry, a black man, is cast as Billy Bigelow, a violent and

	<p>abusive character who makes a series of disastrous mistakes. He is treated as an outsider and regarded with suspicion almost immediately by the tight Maine community in which the story is set. Amar Ramasar (of Trinidad, Indian and Puerto Rican descent) is cast as Jigger, Billy's ne'er-do-well companion who leads him into thievery and is ultimately responsible for Billy's death. Of the 17 reviews documented here (<a href="http://www.playbill.com/article/read-the-reviews-for-broadways-new-carousel">http://www.playbill.com/article/read-the-reviews-for-broadways-new-carousel</a>) only two even mention the ethnicity of the cast.</p> <p>Daily Beast: "The show features color-blind casting; we are intended to take the characters as characters, detached from their time."</p> <p>Newsday: "And casting a black man as the abusive husband presents a whole new layer of complexities."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are reviewers reluctant to take on the issue?</li> <li>• How do you think reviewers will react to the casting of black singers as Figaro and Susannah?</li> </ul> <p><u>Opera's Race Problem</u> Some critics argue that opera has a race problem. (<a href="https://vocal.media/geeks/opera-s-race-problem">https://vocal.media/geeks/opera-s-race-problem</a>)</p> <p>"It is overwhelmingly white, racially insensitive, and sometimes outwardly, blatantly, racist."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make the argument for and against this statement. If true, what is the implication for opera today? In today's age, how can an opera company stage culturally appropriate opera?</li> </ul> <p><b>STEP TWO.</b> Have the students make a case for and against the following arguments:</p> <p>Audiences should be culturally sophisticated and be indifferent as to the ethnicity or gender of the singer/actor.</p> <p>Story telling is not impacted by casting; stories are just as believable regardless of the people portraying the characters.</p> <p>Producers/directors should cast characters based on their singing and acting ability and not consider their ethnicity or gender when making decisions.</p>
<b>ADDITIONAL RESOURCE</b>	Teaching Tolerance: <a href="http://www.tolerance.org">www.tolerance.org</a>

