Sally & Tom
The Guthrie Theater, in association with The Public Theater, presents

**Sally & Tom**

by **SUZAN-LORI PARKS**
directed by **STEVE H. BROADNAX III**

October 1 – November 6, 2022

McGuire Proscenium Stage

### THE PLAY

Synopsis, Setting and Characters • 4

### THE PLAYWRIGHT

About Suzan-Lori Parks • 5

In Her Own Words • 6

Responses to Parks • 8

### CULTURAL CONTEXT

History Is Now • 10

A Singular Imagination Meets a Collective Story • 12

### EDUCATION RESOURCES

Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities • 14

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For Further Reading and Understanding • 16
This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for additional content.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Thanks for your interest in Sally & Tom. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.
Synopsis

After spending three years in Paris, founding father Thomas Jefferson returns to his Monticello plantation in rural Virginia where the complexities of his relationship with Sally Hemings, the teenage sister of his enslaved valet and chef, begin to unfold. Monticello is not Paris, and everything — yet nothing — feels the same. In this clever collision of American history and theater, acclaimed playwright and Pulitzer Prize winner Suzan-Lori Parks spotlights the unexpected parallels between 1790 and today while taking the audience on a journey through the past that inevitably catches up with the present.

SETTING
1790 Monticello and present day.

CHARACTERS
Luce, the playwright, who also performs Sally
Mike, the director, who also performs Tom
Maggie, the publicist and fight director, who also performs Mary
Kwame, an actor who performs James
Ginger, the dramaturg, who also performs Patsy
Scout, the stage manager, who also performs Polly
Geoff, the set and costume designer, who also performs Cooper, Carey and Tobias
Devon, the light and sound designer and musician, who also performs Nathan
French Revelers
About Suzan-Lori Parks

Named among Time magazine’s 100 Innovators for the Next Wave, Suzan-Lori Parks is one of the most acclaimed playwrights in American drama today and the first African American woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for Topdog/Underdog in 2002. In addition to a major 20th anniversary Broadway revival of Topdog/Underdog directed by Kenny Leon, Parks’ new works will receive three world premieres during this theater season: Sally & Tom at the Guthrie Theater, Plays for the Plague Year at Joe’s Pub and a musical adaptation of the 1972 film The Harder They Come at The Public Theater.

Parks’ project 365 Days/365 Plays (where she wrote a play a day for an entire year) was produced in over 700 theaters worldwide, creating one of the largest grassroots collaborations in theater history. Her other plays include The Book of Grace, Unchain My Heart: The Ray Charles Musical, In the Blood (2000 Pulitzer Prize finalist), Venus (1996 Obie Award), The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom (1990 Obie Award, Best New American Play), The America Play and Fucking A.

Her adaptation of The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess won the 2012 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical. Her plays Father Comes Home From the Wars (Parts 1, 2 and 3) — set during the Civil War — were awarded the Horton Foote Prize and Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama and named a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist. In response to the Trump presidency, Parks held witness, writing A Hundred Plays for the First Hundred Days. One of her newest plays, White Noise, which won an Outer Critics Circle Award in 2019, recently had its European premiere at the Bridge Theatre in London. During the pandemic, Parks embarked on yet another play-a-day writing project, resulting in Plays for the Plague Year.

Parks’ work for television and film includes adaptations of Native Son (HBO, directed by Rashid Johnson, NAACP Image Award) and Their Eyes Were Watching God (Oprah Winfrey Presents). Original screenplays include Girl 6 (directed by Spike Lee) and The United States vs. Billie Holliday (directed by Lee Daniels). For television, she recently served as showrunner, executive producer and head writer for “Genius: Aretha.” Parks is Writer in Residence at The Public Theater where she regularly offers her free-to-all, online creativity class Watch Me Work.

In addition to receiving a MacArthur Genius Grant and the prestigious Gish Prize for excellence in the arts, Parks is the recipient of other grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts and New York Foundation for the Arts. She is also a recipient of a Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Award, CalArts/Herb Alpert Award in the Arts, Steinberg Award and Guggenheim Foundation Grant. She is an alum of New Dramatists and Mount Holyoke College. In November 2022, Parks will be inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame.

Learn more at www.suzanloriparks.com.

PHOTO: TAM SHELL
In Her Own Words

A playwright, as any other artist, should accept the bald fact that content determines form and form determines content; that form and content are interdependent. Form should not be looked at askance and held suspect — form is not something that “gets in the way of the story” but is an integral part of the story. This understanding is important to me and my writing. This is to say that as I write along the container dictates what sort of substance will fit it and, at the same time, the substance is dictating the size and the shape of the container. Also, “form” is not a strictly “outside” thing while “content” stays “inside.” It’s like this: I am an African American woman — this the form I take, my content predicates this form and this form is inseparable from my content. No way could I be me otherwise.

From her essay “Elements of Style”
1994

In the early 1980s, I took a writing class with James Baldwin, the wonderful novelist, essayist and playwright. He encouraged me to go into playwriting. Would I have not gone into playwriting if it had not been for James Baldwin? To be honest, I probably would’ve eventually found my way into playwriting because my short stories already so closely resembled playwriting. I might not have joined the theatre that day, as I did when he suggested it. Maybe I would have done it the next year. I was already in love with Shakespeare. ...

I started hanging out at BACA [downtown in Brooklyn] because they welcomed me. It wasn’t because I wanted to be downtown and avant-garde. I just wanted to get my plays done. I self-produced my New York premiere at the Gas Station and had a wonderful time. But then I thought, well, it might be nice to get produced because people do get plays done, you know, at venues where they have programming. [laughs] ...

Self-producing can be very cool. But a writer should remember that regardless of production opportunities, she can always write — you gotta make up your mind early on: I’m going to write regardless — because I’m a writer. ...

There are lots of writers I look up to: Ntozake Shange, Adrienne Kennedy. ... But I don’t just take my role models from Black women who write plays, although there are awesome and fearless women who do. Or Black women who write, although there are awesome and fearless women who do. I take my role models from whoever is great at what they do. That’s who I look to. My North Star might be an awesome Black woman or a dead white man. I don’t care, you know? I want to be as good as I possibly can at what I do. So I look to the people who are as good as they possibly are.

When I was coming up, I was like, “Ntozake Shange’s great.” Also Edward Albee is great. Shakespeare’s great. Sophocles is great. August Wilson’s great. So is Sam Shepard, so is Tennessee Williams, so is Euripides, Ed Bullins and the list goes on and on. I was looking up to the awesome ones. Those are the footsteps I want to walk in. They could be Black or Asian or Latino or Greek or dead or whatever.

From The Play That Changed My Life: America’s Foremost Playwrights on the Plays That Influenced Them
Edited by Ben Hodges, Applause, 2009
I’ve sometimes maybe often wished that I was the writer who could be more — not regular or consistent — but more recognizable from piece to piece. I seem to become reincarnated from piece to piece, which is very strange, and, yeah, I can’t write like I used to, because I’m no longer in 1999, when I wrote *Topdog/Underdog*.

*The Playwright at Work: Conversations*
By Rosemarie Tichler and Barry Jay Kaplan, Northwestern University Press, 2012

Why do I like history? It sounds sappy: to give voice to people who are voiceless. I don’t know about that because all these characters are parts of me. I think we’re all one person. History, I don’t know. Why is *Devotees* what it is? David Hwang wanted me to write a play about interracial relationships to be a companion piece to a play he was writing for the Humana Festival. I said, “Okay, let me go home and think about it.” And we hung out for a little while and he asked, “So what have you got?” And I said, “I’ve got three Black women in white wedding dresses. And that’s interracial, right?” And he said, “Sort of...” So we went ahead. But I wrote that play because I wanted to give Black actresses a chance to wear pretty dresses, wedding dresses. ...

So the plays have all these weird reasons. It’s not so much that I have an agenda as I want to see women in pretty dresses. I want to see a Black guy dress up like Abraham Lincoln because I think that would be really funny. There he is walking around having a good time. I’m not thinking so much about history. He is, though, about the past and how the past is behind you. How you follow in someone’s footsteps and how that doesn’t make any sense because they’re actually behind you. So you’re walking the wrong way. But that’s really the drama of being alive. It’s passing through time. That’s what we do. That’s what people do when they’re watching a play. They pass through a certain amount of time together.

*From The Playwright’s Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing and the Politics of Culture*
By David Savran, Theatre Communications Group, 1999

In 2015, Jim Houghton, who was the founding Artistic Director at New York’s Signature Theatre, invited me to have a retrospective of my plays. I was hesitant, so he asked me what would make it interesting, and I said I wanted my band to be in residence, too. It was about giving myself permission and continuing to evolve: I’ve written at least one song for almost every play of mine as a little something-something, the prize inside the Cracker Jacks. A lot of artists find their thing and stick to it, like it’s the only flotation device in the sea. But there are many — and I can swim. I’m not expecting to do everything on the same level of excellence, but that’s not the point. So Signature put on some of my past works, and our band would play in the lobby after the weekend shows.

“Friends Who Make Music Together”
Responses to Parks

Susan Parks: an utterly astounding and beautiful creature who may become one of the most valuable artists of our time.

James Baldwin
Evaluating Parks in an undergraduate writing class at Mount Holyoke College

[The love affair between Parks and the American theatre has, like most love affairs, been complicated. Words like “diversity” and “multiculturalism” sound good in publications, but the truth is, many theatres are still afraid to take what they consider to be financial risks and often assume, a priori, that audiences will bristle at unfamiliar or marginal work. “Marginal”: a code word for formally experimental or “culturally specific” plays. According to marketing departments, Parks’ are both.

The “surface difficulty” and “daring” of Parks’ first two history plays, Imperceptible Mutabilities and The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, did appeal strongly to a small yet unpredictable assortment of theatre artists, audiences and critics who could see how Parks was inventing new ways of shaping dramatic character and structure and could hear the originality and feel the physical impact of what she was doing with words. … No one of her generation has yet approached the level of her contribution.

Yet Parks has never been well cast in the narrow role the American theatre has wanted, and perhaps still wants, her to play. The daughter of an army colonel, Parks grew up across six different states and spent a long stretch of time, her junior high school years, in Germany. There, she both learned German and gained a critical, estranging perspective on language itself, and therefore also on identity and culture. “In Germany,” she told an interviewer in 1993, “I wasn’t a Black person, strictly speaking. I was an American who didn’t speak the language. I was a foreigner.” Like Baldwin, Josephine Baker, Richard Wright and so many other African American artists, Parks was changed by spending time outside of race-obsessed America. “Places far away like Timbuktu, like France, like Africa,” she wrote in a 1996 essay for Grand Street, “they draw us out like dreams. The far-away provides a necessary distance, a new point of reference, a place for perspective.” Forced separation and the longing for home, for the missing, for the distant and the dead, pervade her writing. … Yet reducing this recurring motif to psychology or biography obscures the more important matter of how it works as a formal principle: Parks’ is a drama of longing and echoes. “Every play I write is about love and distance. And time,” Parks said in 1994. “And from that we can get things like history.”

Shawn Marie Garrett

AMERICAN THEATRE

Susan Parks: an utterly astounding and beautiful creature who may become one of the most valuable artists of our time.
The historically focused elements of Parks’ aesthetic position her as an author whose work challenges the ways readers imagine and experience history and/or receive recorded accounts thereof. These texts make history more visceral and relevant by asking readers to see the past as more personal and urgent: History and identity remain ever entwined, haunting each other while still seeking to redeem both the other and itself. Parks’ texts represent this tumultuous relationship by revisiting or, more accurately, by revising some of the most famous texts and contexts in our culture and history. …

The “revision” inherent in Parks’ aesthetic is by no means “revisionist.” Indeed it could be read as the inverse of such an approach. Parks belongs to the group of writers and historians who revise history with an eye toward putting absent or neglected groups back into it. Even when she borrows themes or characters from Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Jacobs, William Faulkner or Tony Kushner, she does not tear these authors’ texts apart; instead she builds on them, using them as foundations for a new text. And, through these new texts, we see the old text again. …

Parks’ revisionary works connect modern Black playwrights with the ill-fated Venus Hottentot, question what became of the freedom promised in Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation and bring Faulkner’s dead back to life. Parks removes the bandage that we too often use to hide or ineffectually salve histories or stories that are too complicated or too painful to engage, as well as the bandages we have used to cover the wounds that are gaping holes in history and literature — the stories that have not been passed on. …

Jennifer Larson
Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks, The University of South Carolina Press, 2012

The New Yorker

Suzan-Lori Parks has since become renowned for her audacity, both on the page and in the world. The author of nine full-length plays, most of which are taught at drama schools across the country, and one of the founders of a wave of multilayered, historically aware and linguistically complicated theatre, she aims to defeat what she calls “the Theatre of Schmaltz” — “the play-as-wrapping-paper-version-of-hot-newspaper-headline.” Parks was the first Black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for Drama — for her 2001 play Topdog/Underdog — after having been short-listed for In the Blood, her 1999 reimagining of The Scarlet Letter. A writer who crosses cultural boundaries, as well as social ones, she has had her work produced everywhere, from the smallest avant-garde stages to Broadway. Her voice is both idiosyncratic and eerily familiar, one of few in the popular theatre to fully exploit the power of spoken Black English.

Hilton Als
“The Show-Woman,” The New Yorker, October 22, 2006

During the past quarter century, Suzan-Lori Parks has emerged as the most consistently inventive, and venturesome, American dramatist working today.

Ben Brantley
“The Great Work Continues,” The New York Times, June 1, 2018
In a recent conversation around her new work *Sally & Tom* premiering here at the Guthrie, Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks contextualizes the idea of “being human.” Human, as in the vastness often reduced into singularity in the face of art and identity in society. Parks’ process with *Sally & Tom* reflects the power of stepping into the story of others’ lives and embodying a collective experience beyond politics — acknowledging the universal web in which we are all spun, regardless of the emotional depths.

With *Sally & Tom*, Parks addresses an underdog truth: universal polarization. The ability to be all and nothing, traumatized yet healed, different yet connected.

**JASMINE McBride:** How does *Sally & Tom* compare to some of your earlier pieces? Can you speak to how you’ve evolved in your voice as an artist?

**SUZAN-LORI PARKS:** Some people go, “Suzan-Lori Parks used to write poetic or beautiful stuff. Now she’s writing this stuff that looks like real...”
JM: Racism is still very prevalent today. How would you say the experience conveyed between Sally and Tom reflects modern times?

SLP: History is now. What is happening, was happening; what was happening, is happening. 1790 was the year that Thomas Jefferson came back from France after being away for several years. America had already started being established. 1776 was in the rearview mirror. And so, these American ideals were very strong and very present. You could still smell the gunpowder from the American Revolution. The question of freedom was still a real thing. America just won her freedom. What I love about Sally & Tom is that every character in the play is a person. As a writer, I really work to walk in the shoes of the character as much as I can, whether they’re a white guy like Thomas Jefferson or a Black person like Sally Hemings. I step out of myself as I present in this incarnation; I step into the shoes, embrace the heart, wrap myself around the guts of whichever character I’m writing.

JM: Was it an emotional process writing Sally & Tom? Was it difficult, especially as a Black woman? Was it liberating?

SLP: These days, we’re often encouraged to shy away from trauma-based stuff. “Don’t write about that.” Someone like me, someone like you — we can only write about joyous things where everything’s great. There’s a lot of difficulty in the world. We want to hear something that’s gonna make us feel good. There’s nothing wrong with feeling good. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be entertained. And: Art can entertain and take you places that you can’t go alone.

For us to shy away from the difficult stuff because we just want to feel good is a disservice to every person who came before us, regardless of the color of our skin or religion or faith or whatever. It’s a disservice to those people who paved the road for us. They are counting on us to help sing the song. Writing something like Sally & Tom — yeah, it was hard. But there is joy in the difficulty. One thing I know is that at the end of my time on this planet, I will be able to say to the Creator, I did my job. It was hard, many tears, struggling with stuff. I mean, that speech Thomas Jefferson says, that was hard to write. That speech Sally Hemings delivers, that was hard to write. James’ speech ... [pauses] We had to look face to face. That heaviness is made light, is made bearable, when we are walking the path that we should walk and not shying away from it or covering it up with something that will only entertain us.

JM: You mentioned the importance of doing what our people have fought for. Was there a specific time in your life when doing the work of the ancestors became very important to you? Or was it always part of who you are in your artistry?

SLP: My dad was in the service, so we moved all around the world.
Humans love stories. For millennia, as tribes, as city-states, as countries and as cultures, we have collected stories to define who we are to ourselves and to others, to connect us to our past and to give meaning to shared events. Some of those collective stories we call myths, some legends, some history.

For more than 2,400 years in the Western theater, playwrights have used collective stories to inspire their individual artistry. Because it’s a story owned by the collective, there’s a special power in a person telling that story anew. Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks follows an estimable line of playwrights who take a familiar collective story and re-present it to offer a new perspective.

**MYTH**

It’s probably not a surprise that Ancient Greece — where Western theater began — also had a robust mythology. (While in current parlance “myth” may often be used to mean “falsehood,” in a literary and historical context, mythology is a way we explain ourselves to ourselves.) Those great tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides used their culture’s myths as the basis for early dramatic literature. With a deliberate point of view, structure and cast of characters, they crafted those myths for their own specific purposes. Think you can avoid Fate? See what happened to Oedipus. Want to dump your old wife for a new one? Meet Medea. Turn your back on a god? *The Bacchae* provides a harrowing possible outcome. That these plays were presented as part of civic festivals only solidified their status as artistic glue to bind people within the Greek community.

Only a fraction of plays written during the fifth century B.C.E. on the rocky isles of Greece have come down to us. The surviving plays became cornerstones of Western theater and continued to inspire later playwrights. Witness most of Roman theater, Racine’s *Phèdre* of the 17th century and Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra* of the 20th.

**LEGEND**

A cousin to the myth is the legend — a story or character that’s not quite historical yet is rooted in a little kernel of truth. In Spain, the legend of Don Juan became a literary character during its Golden Age, when Tirso de Molina wrote *The Trickster of Seville* in 1630. How we think of Don Juan (or a Don Juan) today — as a slippery lothario — is due in large part to Molina’s play.

Within a generation, another playwright, Ana Caro, subverted this legend in her own work, which features Leonor, one of Don Juan’s deserted conquests, as the heroine who fights for and reclaims
her own honor while bringing Don Juan to heel. (If this sounds familiar, Caro’s Valor was recently presented in the Dowling Studio by A Guthrie Experience.)

Alas, Caro’s play was one of many by female playwrights that were buried by time, so Leonor hasn’t taken her place in legend or literature beside Don Juan. But imagine the surprise and delight of Caro’s original 17th-century audience who watched the Spanish libertine receive his comeuppance through Caro’s imagination.

Other legends have inspired stage plays as well. Doctor Faustus notably headlined a play in the 16th century by Christopher Marlowe, who put a tragic spin on the tale, and in the 18th century by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose version of the character reflected his own philosophical musings. People selling their souls for knowledge or talent is an oft-repeated story; the similar (though later) legend of bluesman Robert Johnson at the crossroads inspired Keith Glover’s Thunder Knocking on the Door in the 1990s.

HISTORY
A third form of collective story is history, also not surprisingly invented by the Greeks (thank you, Herodotus). Because history comes with the burden of Truth and Reality, it can be the most complicated of the collective stories for a playwright to tackle. But one need only look to William Shakespeare to see a master of his art succeed at the task.

He wrote two sweeping cycles of four plays, which together enact events of English history during 1399–1485. A century after the last of those events, Shakespeare used his country’s history to hold a mirror to his own time and investigate leadership, legitimacy, patriotism and dissent. Unlike his previously mentioned predecessors, who needn’t worry about the descendants of Oedipus or Faustus crying foul, Shakespeare had to carefully thread a needle of political and dramatic needs because among his potential audience was no less than Elizabeth I, the granddaughter of Henry VII, the king who succeeded Richard III and ended the War of the Roses.

Historically, Richard was likely a mediocre king at worst, but to serve both a dramatic narrative and a queen’s legacy, Shakespeare shaped Richard into one of the great stage villains, thus making Henry heroic. More recently, playwrights from Arthur Miller (The Crucible) to James Goldman (The Lion in Winter) to Sophie Treadwell (Machinal) have found inspiration in history to examine issues in their own time.

More recently, playwrights from Arthur Miller (The Crucible) to James Goldman (The Lion in Winter) to Sophie Treadwell (Machinal) have found inspiration in history to examine issues in their own time.

Which brings us to the play you’re here to see: Sally & Tom. Hundreds of books have been written about Thomas Jefferson or people and events connected to him. We’ve learned his story, often in school, through the lens of history.

Parks, however, didn’t adapt a history book, and Sally & Tom is not history. It’s arguably something equally important in our examination of human behavior, of what we mean to each other and how we understand love and the yearning for freedom.

In this production, a playwright’s imagination and skill bring new patterns, meanings and understanding to a story we have collectively inherited.
HISTORY: WHAT?

The action of Sally & Tom by Suzan-Lori Parks bounces between 1790 and present day. A group of actors change costumes and characters onstage as they rehearse a play about Thomas Jefferson, Sally Hemings and others who lived at Jefferson’s Monticello plantation. As playwright Luce wrestles with the material on the page, while also playing Sally Hemings onstage, she begins to experience her own life in a new light. If we could peer into the past, what might be illuminated for us in the present? Sally & Tom opens a window of possibility for us to imagine what might have happened between two historical figures: Thomas Jefferson, who penned the Declaration of Independence, and Sally Hemings, who was enslaved.

Discussion Questions

• Have you heard of Thomas Jefferson? What do you know about his story?
• Have you heard of Sally Hemings? What do you know about her story?
• What do you know about Monticello located near Charlottesville, Virginia?
• What would you change if you could rewrite history?
• How do the events of the past influence the present?

Classroom Activity

Ask the students to imagine that they can travel back in time to witness any event in history. Encourage them to choose a moment from before they were born and as far back in time as they like. Perhaps it’s the time period of a movie they’ve seen, the subject of a story they’ve heard from a relative who experienced it firsthand or a story from ancient times. Invite them to write for five to seven minutes about a specific event or moment in history with the following questions in mind:

• What about this moment in history do you understand?
• What about it do you wish you understood more fully and why?
• What about this historical event makes you wish you could have witnessed it?
• If you could deepen your understanding of this event, how might that be useful to you in the present?

Reflection

Invite the students to share their reflections in small groups or with the class.
HISTORY: WHOSE?
As a playwright, Luce gets to choose who speaks as well as the words they speak. She wrestles with the reality that the actors in her play have much more they would like to say than their characters might have actually said or been able/allowed to say.

Discussion Questions
• When telling a story, how essential is it to present more than one point of view?
• How can we include multiple voices when sharing stories about the past?
• Why is it important to consider the way history is recorded?
• Whose history have you learned in school? Which points of view are missing and why?

Classroom Activity
Invite the students to make a connection to the future by taking five minutes to write a note that someone will uncover 150 years from now. The contents of the note should describe what the world is like today and include whatever feels most interesting or important for someone from the future to know about this day in 2022. When the five minutes are up, have the students fold their notes in half and place them in a pile. Ask each student to pick one of the notes (ideally not their own) and read it out loud to the class.

Reflection
Invite the students to respond to the following questions:
• What is it like to hear various points of view on the same topic?
• What is it like to hear your own point of view included or to recognize that your own point of view is missing from other perspectives?
• What if you were someone from the year 2172 and one of these letters was presented to you as American History in 2022? What would it reveal about the accuracy, opinion and influence of individual perspectives within what we refer to as “history”?

HISTORY AND THEATER: HOW AND WHY?
In the best of circumstances, storytelling can be an effective means of creating connections across differences. Theater is a place where people come to hear stories and examine myriad questions about life. When one is fully invested in a story, it usually means they care about the characters. A human heart beats at the center of any given historical event, and theater allows us to consider life experiences outside of our own — real or imagined.

Discussion Questions
• How do artists shed light on history in a unique way?
• What might we gain by examining a historical subject through an artistic lens versus through news reports or a chapter in a textbook?
• If you see a historical figure played by an actor onstage, in a movie or on television, do you feel more connected to them than if you read about them in a textbook or biography?

Classroom Activity
Ask the students to pretend that they’re each preparing to write a play about their favorite historical figure. If they had the ability to travel back in time and meet this historical figure, what questions would they choose to ask? Invite the students to write down the following:
• The name of a historical figure they’d choose to write a play about
• Five questions they would ask this person in order to inspire the writing of the play
• Other characters who would appear in the play
• A title for the play

Reflection
Invite the students to share their play ideas in small groups or with the class.
For Further Reading and Understanding

PLAYS BY SUZAN-LORI PARKS

Published by Concord Theatricals
The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World
The Book of Grace
365 Days/365 Plays
Father Comes Home From the Wars (Parts 1, 2 and 3)
White Noise
Fucking A

Published by Dramatists Play Service
The America Play
In the Blood
Topdog/Underdog
Venus

Published by Theatre Communications Group
The America Play and Other Works
The Red Letter Plays: In the Blood and Fucking A
100 Plays for the First Hundred Days

BOOKS ABOUT SUZAN-LORI PARKS


BOOKS ABOUT SALLY HEMINGS AND THOMAS JEFFERSON


ARTICLES

www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/10/30/the-show-woman

www.nature.com/articles/23835

www.nature.com/articles/23802


VIDEO

www.netflix.com/title/81034518

RADIO

https://freshairarchive.org/segments/juneteenth-historian-examines-hope-and-hostility-toward-emancipation

WEBSITES

Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. Learn about slavery at Monticello, including information about the plantation, the enslaved people and the life of Sally Hemings, plus memoirs and oral histories.
www.monticello.org/slavery

George Washington’s Mount Vernon. Discover the members, the rivalries and more from the president’s first Cabinet.
www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/the-first-president/the-first-cabinet